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## CHAPTER 1

### Evangelical Christianity in a Post-Christian World

Peter Berger has noted that, of the world's religions, it is Protestant Christianity that has had the most 'intense and enduring encounter with the modern world'.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, previous examinations of this relationship have focused on a number of affinities. Ernst Troeltsch charted the role of sectarian Protestantism in the emergence of modern social democracy.<sup>2</sup> Max Weber famously argued that Calvinistic Protestantism was instrumental in the rise of the capitalist system in Europe.<sup>3</sup> More recently, David Martin has mapped the ways in which Protestantism reflects broader processes of social differentiation, drawing complex connections between Protestant revivalism and the development of modern states.<sup>4</sup> Protestantism and modernity clearly enjoy a complicated and multi-faceted relationship.

Taking up the phenomenon of Protestant evangelicalism – associated with the centrality of scripture, strict moral codes and a passion for the conversion of others – many recent scholars have spoken in terms of movements of resistance and protest. According to this paradigm, which shapes much of the literature, evangelical groups emerge and thrive in so far as they form a response to a perceived breakdown in the moral order of contemporary society. They offer meaning and consistency in a context of cultural chaos. Bernice Martin expresses the argument well in her discussion of Pentecostal revivalism in South America:

The argument that Pentecostalism offers middle-range solutions to these problems owes something to a Durkheimian view of religion as a hedge against anomie, both the anomie of social and institutional disorder and the normlessness accompanying suddenly expanded horizons, mass mobility and the decay of older systems which had

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Berger, *The Heretical Imperative. Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation* (London: Collins, 1980), p. xii.

<sup>2</sup> Ernst Troeltsch, *Protestantism and Progress. A Historical Study of the Relation of Protestantism to the Modern World* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1966).

<sup>3</sup> Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Scribner's, 1958).

<sup>4</sup> David Martin, *A General Theory of Secularisation* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1978) and *Pentecostalism: The World their Parish* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002).

held the individual tightly within familial, communal, class and patronage frameworks.<sup>5</sup>

Martin's comments reflect a common trend, whereby Protestant evangelicalism is *both explained and defined* in terms of its resistance to 'the world'. Movements and churches are made sense of as self-conscious reactions to a set of social problems, problems for which evangelical groups promise to have the solution. This certainly rings true within many western contexts, in which the impassioned voices of evangelical Christianity have achieved the status of an often jarring but persistent minority. In the USA, this minority is highly significant, not merely because it represents a significant proportion of the population (25-30%<sup>6</sup>), but also because evangelicals are exerting an increasingly powerful influence over the national moral and political agenda. The resistance of US evangelicals to 'the world' has been understood within the context of the 'culture wars' between conservatives and liberals, a struggle for the religious and moral identity of America.<sup>7</sup> If there is a struggle on this side of the Atlantic, then it is far quieter and draws in far fewer participants, not least on account of the heavily secularised nature of western European society. The UK is no exception, and some have argued that the detachment of the majority of the population from the traditions and values of the church makes the UK a post-Christian nation. This is not the same as saying the UK is a secular nation; statistical evidence counts against a resurgence of secularism and the number of respondents to attitudinal surveys who tick the boxes against atheism or agnosticism is still significantly low.<sup>8</sup> No, the post-Christian thesis specifically refers to the indifference with which the Christian churches are regarded by most of the population. While we may characterise the early twentieth century as a period when, even among non-churchgoers, the institutions of the churches were respected and revered as guardians of morality, symbols of local, ethnic or national identity and trusted purveyors of public ceremony, they are now largely ignored, especially by the younger generations, who simply fail to see them as significant aspects of their lives.

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<sup>5</sup> Bernice Martin, 'From Pre- to Post-Modernity in Latin America: The Case of Pentecostalism', in P. Heelas (ed.) *Religion, Modernity and Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), p. 127.

<sup>6</sup> While figures which are cited obviously vary, this approximation is commonly cited as a gauge of evangelical popularity in the contemporary USA. For a discussion of the current situation in the US, see Christian Smith, *Christian America? What Evangelicals Really Want* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2000).

<sup>7</sup> James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991).

<sup>8</sup> According to the Soul of Britain survey of 2000, for example, 8% of the population said they were 'convinced atheists' while there was a figure of 10% for agnostics. See Steve Bruce, *God is Dead: Secularization in the West* (Oxford and Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002), p. 193.

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This picture is challenged by some on the grounds that while institutional engagement with the churches has diminished, the pursuit of what they stand for has not. There remains a strong interest in the spiritual, and proponents of this perspective focus upon various dimensions in building up an alternative account: the role of the churches in maintaining a vicarious form of religion on behalf of the wider population, the mass of unchurched Christians apparently identified by the 2001 UK census, or the enthusiasm for alternative spiritualities which more successfully cater to widespread interest in human experience as a site of spiritual significance. Such developments fall between institutional orthodoxy and post-Christian indifference, highlighting the grey areas of the UK's religious landscape. And yet there remain significant flashes of colour (some might say blocks of shade), reflected in religious movements whose doctrinally conservative, vehemently defended beliefs are constructed in opposition to a vision of western culture as morally and spiritually bankrupt. These movements are not interested in the grey areas, and do not see culture as a potential source of spiritual nourishment, but construct it over and against their own set of fiercely held religious convictions. In recent years, we have come to associate such a passion for religious purity with radical Islam, and with the fundamentalism that inspires acts of terrorism. But the opposition to contemporary culture associated with these groups is also passionately affirmed, if often expressed differently, by some Christians, many of whom call themselves evangelical. They recognise the post-Christian nature of contemporary UK culture and engage with it as a spiritual challenge, a reason to pursue their mission to turn the tide and change things for the better, in accordance with God's plan. In theological terms, this orientation is so pervasive as to be almost an evangelical universal; however, it is pursued in such a variety of ways and with such varied results that the evangelical engagement with culture remains but a foundation for a far more complex analysis.

In so far as contemporary evangelical Christianity may be understood with reference to its passionate engagement with 'the world', the paradigm of resistance described earlier on is a useful sociological starting point in making sense of precise contours of change. While this paradigm may be traced to theological disputes deeply embedded in the chronicles of Christian history, within contemporary sociological discussion, it depends upon a more recent set of ideas. Simply put, it depends upon the commonplace argument that modernity has brought with it differentiation, complexity and a consequent breakdown of traditional social order, including the elevation of the individual and the dissolution of community. This is classically associated with thinkers such as Emile Durkheim, Max Weber and Karl Marx, who have shaped over a century of discussion. One influential account which draws from all three, and which will be described here in detail, is that offered in Peter Berger's *The Homeless Mind: Modernization and Consciousness* (co-written by Birgitte Berger and Hansfried Kellner), which was first published in 1974.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Peter Berger, Brigitte Berger and Hansfried Kellner, *The Homeless Mind: Modernization and Consciousness* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974).

Berger's book is especially illuminating, as it complements his other highly influential publications on religion and has been taken up by numerous subsequent commentators analysing the fate of religion within the contemporary context. Berger's account is also a straightforward, simplified description of a process often rendered more opaque by other authors.

### **Modernisation and the Homeless Mind**

Berger and his colleagues do not conceive of modernity as a fixed state or era, but rather speak of 'societies more or less advanced in a continuum of modernization'.<sup>10</sup> In isolating key features of the modernisation process, they follow Weber and begin with economic factors, and the influence of technology and bureaucracy upon social institutions. They refer to these as 'primary carriers' of modernisation. Pluralism is identified as a 'secondary carrier', but one which is nonetheless viewed as highly significant. However, Berger *et al* do not discuss social change in terms of structural factors alone. Building on Berger's own work with Thomas Luckmann,<sup>11</sup> they address how changes in the social structure affect the ways in which people define their social reality. In this respect, they are concerned with questions traditionally associated with the sociology of knowledge.

Berger *et al* isolate technology, bureaucracy and pluralism as the dominant features of modernity, and argue that, while each of them is embedded in social institutions such as the state, education and the workplace, each also has a 'corollary at the level of consciousness'.<sup>12</sup> That is, they all contribute to the construction of what is called the 'symbolic universe' of modernity.<sup>13</sup> The dominance of technological production generates a sense of the divisibility of reality into components and sequences, which are inter-related. Additionally, it tends to foster a problem-solving attitude towards life and an orientation focused on progress. Bureaucratisation encourages the idea that society may be organised as a system, and that one's affairs are to be carried out in a 'regular and predictable fashion',<sup>14</sup> ideas developed in George Ritzer's later book about the McDonaldization of society.<sup>15</sup> These orientations are originally generated on the basis of encounters the individual has with technology and bureaucracy within key social institutions, but there is an inevitable migration, according to Berger, into their overall perception of reality.

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<sup>10</sup> Berger *et al*, *Homeless Mind*, p. 9.

<sup>11</sup> Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality. A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (London, Fakenham and Reading: Penguin, 1967).

<sup>12</sup> Robert Wuthnow *et al*, *Cultural Analysis: The Work of Peter L. Berger, Mary Douglas, Michel Foucault and Jurgen Habermas* (London, Boston, MA, Melbourne and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), p. 56.

<sup>13</sup> Berger *et al*, *Homeless Mind*, p. 99.

<sup>14</sup> Wuthnow *et al*, *Cultural Analysis*, p. 57.

<sup>15</sup> George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society: An Investigation into the Changing Character of Contemporary Social Life* (Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge Press, 1996).

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Whereas many other commentators have drawn attention to the importance of technology and bureaucracy to the modernisation process, not least Max Weber on the Protestant Ethic and Marshall McLuhan with his work on the mass media,<sup>16</sup> Berger could lay claim to some originality in his focus upon pluralism. Accelerated social differentiation – nowadays intensified by mass communications and advanced technology – engenders a situation in which individuals are exposed to a plurality of lifeworlds. They are forced to deal with the fact that many different sets of values – relating to religion, morality, politics and lifestyle – co-exist, even though they may clash or contradict one another. Berger contrasts this feature of modernity with pre-modern or traditional societies, arguing that the latter offered sufficiently unified and stable value systems to foster social cohesion and secure a sense of meaning for their citizens. Modernity renders this process impossible. For Berger, the pluralism of modernity undermines social cohesion because the disparate elements of reality can no longer be integrated into a single symbolic universe.<sup>17</sup>

Although ostensibly a descriptive account of the modernisation process, Berger *et al's* *Homeless Mind* includes a decidedly negative evaluation, captured in their comments on the discontents of modernity. For the authors, the transformations bound up in modernisation undermine the cohesive power of social institutions; their 'identity defining power' is weakened.<sup>18</sup> The increasing influence of technology brings about experiences of alienation, frustration and anomie. An absorption in bureaucracy fosters abstraction and anonymity in the workplace. Both engender a sense of formality and a dispassionate, scientific outlook on life which fails to cater to the emotional, subjective dimensions of the human condition. Social differentiation also leads to a pluralisation of lifeworlds which undermines any cohesiveness offered in the institutional sphere: '...institutions then confront the individual as fluid and unreliable, and in the extreme case as unreal'.<sup>19</sup>

Consequently, the individual has to fall back on his or her own subjective resources for a sense of identity. In this, Berger follows Arnold Gehlen's argument that modernity generates a turn inward, a *subjectivisation*.<sup>20</sup> The self becomes the centre of the meaning-making process. However, because of the essentially social nature of humankind, this is a very precarious situation. Social identities require affirmation and maintenance from durable agencies outside of themselves, i.e. from institutions and traditions, and these are required to sustain some consistency of form over time. Without these systems of support, humanity stands in a state of existential uncertainty, or homelessness.

Berger *et al's* account of modernity is now over thirty years old and numerous other accounts of contemporary culture, many of them claiming to trace a shift from

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<sup>16</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (London: Routledge, 2001 [original 1964]).

<sup>17</sup> Berger *et al*, *Homeless Mind*, p. 109.

<sup>18</sup> Berger *et al*, *Homeless Mind*, p. 86.

<sup>19</sup> Berger *et al*, *Homeless Mind*, p. 85.

<sup>20</sup> See James Davison Hunter, 'Subjectivisation and the New Evangelical Theodicy', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 20:1 (1982), pp. 39-47.

modernity into postmodernity, have appeared in subsequent years. However, it is described here in detail for two main reasons. First, it defines and contextualises several of the conceptual categories which will occupy us later in this book in exploring the changing state of evangelical Christianity. As we shall see, the evangelical engagement with contemporary culture cannot be fully accounted for without some reflection on the nature of rationalisation, subjectivisation and the social consequences of a perceived breakdown in institutions. Subsequent chapters will discuss how these sociological insights illuminate aspects of evangelical belief and practice. Second, it paints in broad theoretical brush strokes a picture of modernity which is useful in understanding contemporary British society. This will be described in greater detail in chapter two, but for now it is worth noting that if technology, bureaucracy and pluralism were dominant forces in the 1970s, they are even more so now, as testified in the massive influence of the internet, increasingly centralised control over systems of accountability, both in the public and private sectors under a New Labour Government, and the multiplication of traditions and worldviews available to the population. For some, the latter process has been intensified to the point of creating a postmodern cornucopia, with traditions reduced to the status of life choices, often treated as commodities available for consumption within the economic, social, moral and spiritual marketplace. The self is fragmented indeed, and appears to have even less in the way of external resources to depend on than when Berger and his colleagues were first formulating their arguments. Working with this analysis, Berger's comments about the discontents of modernity have not lost their relevance nor their urgency, and like his work on religion, remain pertinent to an examination of contemporary evangelicalism as a religious force which sees itself as responding to these problems.

Berger's understanding of contemporary culture – emphasising moral and symbolic anomie – resonates with many other analyses of late modernity which focus on the common quest for sources of certainty and meaning, sources which promise what Zigmunt Bauman has called 'safety in an insecure world'.<sup>21</sup> One solution is religion, and Berger's work on sacred canopies has steered numerous discussions of how religious groups and movements offer order and respite from the discontents of the world. Given its apparently oppositional stance towards contemporary culture, it is not surprising that evangelical Christianity has often been singled out in this debate as representing a form of religious identity especially suited to fending off the dangers of modernity. Berger's work has been highly influential in the ensuing debates, and his arguments have shaped a paradigm which has dominated much of the sociological work on evangelical religion in recent decades. While there have been those who have dissented from Berger's position, his work remains axiomatic, and even those who do not agree with his arguments about the possibilities of religious affirmation may nevertheless find themselves drawing from aspects of his description of modern culture and its dominant forces.

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<sup>21</sup> Zigmunt Bauman, *Community: Seeking Safety in an Insecure World* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001).

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For this reason, Berger's work has not been superseded as such, but has generated a debate, with three identifiable trajectories emerging from the discussion, each representing a different understanding of the relationship between evangelical Christianity and contemporary western culture. These may be summarised as resistance, cultural accommodation and engaged orthodoxy, and I will take each in turn, for together they furnish us with the proper sociological context for the analysis that is to follow.

### **Conservative Religion and the Project of Resistance**

Many have followed Berger's lead in viewing conservative religious movements as both responses and effective antidotes to the fragmentation and existential instability of the modern condition. They offer certainty in a context of perpetual uncertainty and tend to self-consciously identify this uncertainty as a product of secular modernity. It is not surprising, therefore, that the relationship between evangelicalism and modernity is often characterised as antagonistic. Moreover, their often vociferous effort to maintain moral and symbolic – if not spatial – distance from modern norms, serves as an ongoing strategy by which conservative religious groups shape their subcultures and forge the boundaries of their identity.<sup>22</sup>

The claim that conservative Christian groups seek distance from modernity is not a novel one. Berger himself picks up on an existing trend represented by, among others, Richard Niebuhr<sup>23</sup> and Bryan Wilson,<sup>24</sup> which makes sense of certain sectarian developments as movements of resistance against the modern world. Berger has taken this further, however, in claiming that these groups *need* to sustain distance in order to survive in modern contexts. Conservative groups subscribe to what Berger calls a 'deviant body of knowledge'.<sup>25</sup> That is, their belief systems are antithetical to the dominant norms and values of modern culture. Frequently voiced in hyperbolic polemic from either side, communalism is set against individualism, the embrace of strict moral codes defined in contrast to moral libertarianism, and patriarchal structures of authority are asserted over western norms of gender and sexual equality. It is the ideological boundaries which separate these value claims that, according to Berger, need to be accentuated lest conservative enclaves capitulate to modern influence, fragment and decline. In effect, they are best suited to fend off the onslaught of modernity by existing as a kind of counter-community, fostering homogeneity, solidarity among members and a clearly defined set of

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<sup>22</sup> Dale McConkey, 'Whither Hunter's Culture War? Shifts in Evangelical Morality, 1988-1998', *Sociology of Religion* 62:2 (2001), pp. 149-174.

<sup>23</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (London: Faber, 1952).

<sup>24</sup> Bryan R. Wilson, 'An Analysis of Sect Development', in B.R. Wilson (ed.) *Patterns of Sectarianism. Organisation and Ideology in Social and Religious Movements* (London: Heinemann, 1967), pp. 22-45.

<sup>25</sup> Peter Berger, *A Rumour of Angels. Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural* (London: Penguin, 1969), pp. 31-2.



boundaries that set them apart from the outside world.<sup>26</sup> While Berger was previously pessimistic about their chances, in later work he has acknowledged the recent success of evangelical and fundamentalist Islamic movements, explaining their significant resurgence in terms of his earlier position. That is, they thrive by keeping modernity out.<sup>27</sup>

This position has been most forcefully advanced in recent discussions of fundamentalism, which in the Christian tradition emerged as a deliberate and self-conscious counter response to the liberal modernist trends of the early twentieth century. Steve Bruce focuses upon the fragmentation of life, societalisation,<sup>28</sup> rationalisation and egalitarianism (particularly of gender roles), as aspects of modernity which challenge those who wish to preserve a purity of tradition, and provoke the ire of fundamentalist groups.<sup>29</sup> In focusing upon these 'evils' of modernity, these groups shape their own identities as projects of resistance. Similar arguments are advanced by Manuel Castells,<sup>30</sup> Gilles Kepel<sup>31</sup> and by Zigmunt Bauman, who sees fundamentalism as the quintessential religious form within post-modernity, on account of the fact that it is a direct and combative counter response to the experience of existential uncertainty characteristic of the postmodern condition.<sup>32</sup>

Many discussions of conservative or evangelical Christianity have similarly emphasised the ability of these groups to forge effective barriers against modernity, for the most part through what Bryan Wilson has called 'values of protest'.<sup>33</sup> In his influential assessment of growth and decline among US churches, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing*, Dean Kelley advances an argument that owes much to Berger's work. Observing general patterns of growth among conservative churches and a comparative decline throughout more liberal denominations, Kelley explains this by arguing that it is religions which have strict, clear and exacting demands which fair best. According to Kelley, the main business of religion is to explain the ultimate meaning of life, and systems of meaning are more convincing than others not because of their content, but because of their strictness, seriousness, costliness

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<sup>26</sup> Berger, *Rumour of Angels*, p. 32.

<sup>27</sup> Peter Berger, 'The Desecularization of the World. A Global Overview', in P. Berger (ed.) *The Desecularization of the World. Essays on the Resurgence of Religion in World Politics* (Washington, DC: Ethics and Public Policy Centre; Grand Rapids, MA: Eerdmans, 1999), pp. 1-18.

<sup>28</sup> The process whereby life is increasingly organised not locally, but societally, with that society most often the nation state. See Bruce, *God is Dead*, pp. 12-14 (drawing from the work of Bryan Wilson).

<sup>29</sup> Steve Bruce, *Fundamentalism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000).

<sup>30</sup> Manuel Castells, *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture, Vol. III: End of Millennium* (Malden, MA, and Oxford: Blackwell, 1998).

<sup>31</sup> Gilles Kepel, *The Revenge of God: The Resurgence of Islam, Christianity and Judaism in the Modern World* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994).

<sup>32</sup> Zigmunt Bauman, *Postmodernity and its Discontents* (Cambridge: Polity, 1997).

<sup>33</sup> Wilson, 'Analysis of Sect Development', p. 22.

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and bindingness.<sup>34</sup> The churches Kelley identifies as growing emphasise evangelism, promote a distinctive lifestyle and morality, and disallow individualism in belief, hence affirming Berger's argument for the importance of homogeneity and strict community boundaries. In other words, it is by virtue of erecting firm boundaries of faith that religious groups are able to effectively fend off the inevitably secularising forces of modernity. In fact, Kelley is more optimistic than Berger in that he associates strength with a conviction that leads to mission, and therefore social engagement with the outside world, an engagement that is not indicative of accommodation, but which is robust enough to generate growth. In adopting this orientation, conservative groups may not only sustain the integrity of their value systems, but will actually thrive, as an effective counter force against modern western culture.

Despite his later reservations about Berger's work,<sup>35</sup> Stephen Warner makes similar claims within the context of his ethnographic study of an evangelical parish church in California. Warner argues that conservative religions engender solidarity among their members because they embrace clear teachings which are not open to a wide range of interpretations, and justifies this with reference to his observations of how beliefs are nurtured and sustained within a congregational context.<sup>36</sup> In other words, conservative religions re-affirm and preserve the boundaries that are dissolved or undermined by modern change.

The resistance element within Berger's writing clearly remains influential, and Bauman's work in particular illustrates how the thinking behind this has entered into debates about the nature of postmodernity and the place of religion within it. However, in focusing on resistance to modernity, scholars have been criticised for allowing their interpretative schema to mask important empirical trends on the ground, developments which suggest a greater blurring of boundaries between evangelical Christianity and the culture in which it finds itself. Those concerned with this problem have also built on Berger's work, but as the starting point for a different set of claims, less focused on resistance, more on cultural accommodation.

### **Cultural Accommodation**

Of the recent studies that have found evangelical Christians accommodating to modernity, James Davison Hunter's work stands out as the most influential. Hunter has conducted several empirical studies of evangelical Christian attitudes in the USA and his work, though not uncritical, can be read as an empirical verification of

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<sup>34</sup> Dean Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches are Growing* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), p. xxii.

<sup>35</sup> R. Stephen Warner, 'Work in Progress Toward a New Paradigm for the Sociological Study of Religion in the United States', *American Journal of Sociology* 98:5 (1993), pp. 1044-93.

<sup>36</sup> R. Stephen Warner, *New Wine in Old Wineskins. Evangelicals and Liberals in a Small-town Church* (Berkeley, CA and London: University of California Press, 1988).

Peter Berger's claim that an absence of boundaries against modernity leads to an erosion of traditional values. Put briefly, Hunter argues that the forces of modernisation have, over the course of the twentieth century, penetrated the boundaries of evangelical religion and have initiated a liberalisation of attitudes. Hunter finds a shift away from an understanding of the Bible and evangelical tradition as external, non-negotiable authorities. Instead, evangelicals are becoming more tolerant of non-Christians, less rigid in their readings of the scriptures and more open to possibilities of change within the evangelical worldview.<sup>37</sup>

Hunter acknowledges that there are elements of resistance *and* accommodation within the evangelical movement, arguing for a persistent tension between these two powerful forces:

There is extraordinary pressure to resist these transformations because they [evangelicals] have too much at stake to simply give in. Likewise there is extraordinary pressure to accommodate because, again, they have too much at stake to simply withdraw into an isolated cultural ghetto. Therefore, ideological tension between these two polar responses remains deeply rooted in the world of contemporary Evangelicalism. It is inherent in the faith as it is now lived and experienced.<sup>38</sup>

However, while this pervasive tension undermines any simplistic account of evangelical development, Hunter's evidence indicates a persistent underlying trend. This trend moves in the direction of cultural accommodation, as the values and attitudes of evangelicals increasingly reflect those of the general populace and the symbolic boundaries of conservative Protestantism are eroded.

These changes, according to Hunter, are a result of evangelicals becoming increasingly exposed to the forces of modernity, through higher education and upward mobility, and increased contact with people of other traditions, something endorsed by church sponsored ecumenism. He also points to the fact that the cultural system of evangelical Protestantism, and its associated definitions of moral propriety and familial responsibility, held significant influence over the imagination of the American public right up until the late nineteenth century. In the twentieth century, this changed. First, the fundamentalist controversies caused irreparable damage, and the emerging divisions undermined the prominence the evangelical theological vision had previously enjoyed within American culture. Later on, the cultural revolutions of the 1960s challenged received understandings of sexuality, the family, the beginnings of life and the status of public education. Henceforth, the symbolic boundaries established by conservative Protestantism ceased to exert such strong influence over American culture, which, therefore, no longer provided a context in which the teachings of the evangelical churches appeared so plausible in the eyes of the general population.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> James Davison Hunter, *Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation* (Chicago, IL and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

<sup>38</sup> Hunter, *Evangelicalism*, p. 196.

<sup>39</sup> Hunter, *Evangelicalism*, pp. 191-2.

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Hunter's findings are anticipated in the work of Richard Quebedeaux<sup>40</sup> who, in the 1970s, charted changes in the US evangelical movement, speaking of a new breed of worldly evangelicals. Writings on the British movement have also identified parallel changes, David Bebbington remarking on a diversification and broadening of perspective<sup>41</sup> and Ian Hall finding a new 'moderation' in evangelical convictions.<sup>42</sup> David Smith sees among late twentieth-century British evangelicals an openness to liberal ideas, to other traditions and a concerted effort to relate the gospel to contemporary culture.<sup>43</sup> An orientation characterised by resistance has apparently been superseded by one that seeks a more positive engagement with modernity.

Hunter is sympathetic to Dean Kelley's model for understanding why conservative churches grow, but is not so optimistic about what this means for American evangelicals. For, as Hunter argues, if Kelley is right, that it is religions with clear, strict and exacting demands which are most robust, and if Hunter's own evidence is reliable, and the symbolic boundaries of evangelicalism have suffered from significant erosion since the end of the Second World War, then the trajectory one would expect to see would be one of decline. Indeed, Hunter examines membership figures among conservative denominations and finds his suspicions confirmed; while absolute numbers between the 1940s and 1980s have increased, when general population changes are taken into account, this increase is not dramatic, and growth rates among conservatives have actually decreased. What little expansion there was in the 1970s Hunter puts down to denominational switching rather than revival.<sup>44</sup> For Hunter, the cultural accommodation of evangelical Christianity has engendered a significant secularisation of the movement.

However, not everyone agrees with Hunter's argument, and he has been challenged on a number of grounds. For example, James Penning and Corwin Smidt attempted a re-examination of Hunter's survey data compared with a repeat survey of a similar college population, producing a longitudinal analysis which tested the persistence of the trends identified by Hunter in his earlier work. While they found that some of these continued into the 1990s, others did not, suggesting that if a capitulation to modern culture has occurred, it has been selective rather than general. Moreover, they found that evangelicals with some college education were

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<sup>40</sup> Richard Quebedeaux, *The Worldly Evangelicals* (San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, 1978).

<sup>41</sup> David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain. A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), p. 267.

<sup>42</sup> Ian Rodney Hall, 'The Current Evangelical Resurgence: An Analysis and Evaluation of the Growth of Contemporary Evangelicalism in Britain and the USA' (PhD thesis, University of Leeds, 1994), p. 301.

<sup>43</sup> David Smith, *Transforming the World? The Social Impact of British Evangelicalism* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1998).

<sup>44</sup> Hunter, *Evangelicalism*, pp. 205-6.

much more likely to express certainty in their beliefs than those with none, therefore challenging Hunter's thesis that education generates liberalisation.<sup>45</sup>

More profound challenges to Hunter's and Berger's work have questioned their underlying assumption that cultural accommodation inevitably engenders erosion in the evangelical worldview, leading ultimately to decline. For example, Mark Shibley has proposed what has been called the 'southernization' thesis, i.e. the argument that evangelical growth in the northern states of the US must be explained with reference to the migration of many southerners during the Great Depression and after the Second World War. Many of these migrants established their own churches, and while at first they offered a spiritual home for other evangelicals from the south, eventually they realised that, in order to thrive, they would have to adapt their separatist style and broaden their appeal. The contemporary inheritors of this tradition, such as the Vineyard churches and Calvary Chapel, have grown rapidly because they have embraced the dominant surrounding culture, including an attitude of tolerance and openness to forms of expression, organisation and community drawn from a wider pool of influences than evangelical Christianity. Contra Kelley, these churches have not thrived by defending clear and strict boundaries, but by adapting to the cultural context in which they find themselves.<sup>46</sup>

In his study of evangelical 'new paradigm' churches, Donald Miller also finds a significant engagement with wider cultural forces, and rejects the Bergerian approach for the additional reason that it is overly cognitive.<sup>47</sup> Instead, Miller focuses on subjectivity, on the importance of an ongoing, intimate relationship with God, which caters to a need for 'life-changing, affective religious experience'.<sup>48</sup> According to Miller, new paradigm churches such as the charismatic Vineyard fellowship thrive in part because they successfully meet this need, a need which is widespread in a society characterised by technology, bureaucracy and a lack of connectedness between people. New paradigm Christians are theologically conservative, often biblical literalists, but are progressive in their ecclesiology – fostering loose organisational structures and encouraging lay leadership. Members affirm that knowledge is not just rational, but also has an important experiential element. They are firm believers in miracles, God's guidance of specific individuals and the charismatic element of worship. In other words, the new paradigm embrace a kind of subjectivisation, a turn inwards, to the complexities of personal experience<sup>49</sup> and in so doing exemplify a creative – and in numerical terms, apparently successful – negotiation with modernity, exhibiting movements of resistance and accommodation concurrently.

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<sup>45</sup> James M. Penning and Corwin E. Smidt, *Evangelicalism: The Next Generation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), pp. 165-7.

<sup>46</sup> Mark Shibley, *Resurgent Evangelicalism in the United States. Mapping Cultural Change since 1970* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1996).

<sup>47</sup> Donald E. Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism: Christianity in the New Millennium* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997), p. 75.

<sup>48</sup> Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism*, p. 25.

<sup>49</sup> Hunter, 'Subjectivisation and the New Evangelical Theodicy', p. 40.

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In this way Miller's new paradigm reflects developments across the evangelical charismatic movement, whereby human experience becomes a source of religious knowledge or a source of empowerment. It also reflects a widespread focus upon the religious life of the self as both site for the sacred and centre of evangelical responsibility. Together, the various aspects of subjectivisation may be seen as a response to the weakening of institutional sacred canopies and capitulation to modern individualism, in accordance with Berger's vision of modernity, but which also mark an accommodation whose consequences for the evangelical worldview and for the robustness of evangelical community are far from predetermined. As Miller demonstrates, the relationship between evangelicalism and contemporary culture is complex and discriminate, and the dynamic that emerges between them may owe as much to the specifics of local religiosity as to the logic of modern social change.

### **Engaged Orthodoxy**

While many treatments of evangelicalism may be conveniently organised into the above two trends – emphasising resistance and accommodation respectively – it would be untrue to suggest that Peter Berger's work only allows contemporary evangelicals two stark options from which to choose. Indeed, in their critique of Hunter's work, Penning and Smidt point out that in his later writings, Berger speaks more of gradations of resistance and accommodation that evangelical groups may exhibit in their ongoing struggles with modernity. Within the context of this nuanced account, Berger actually highlights four basic options which are available to religious traditions faced with the values of modern society. Cognitive bargaining involves the retention of some beliefs and the discarding of others, and hence some, albeit selective, capitulation to the doubt engendered by secular modernity. Cognitive surrender goes one step further; after acknowledging that modernity is correct in denying transcendence, groups may then attempt to salvage something of what Christian tradition may mean in light of this. Cognitive retrenchment, on the other hand, takes two forms, both based on a denial of the validity of secular modernity and a re-affirmation of the whole of a traditional belief system as it stands. In a defensive form, it requires a withdrawal from society, and the creation and maintenance of a closed religious subculture, preserved from the wider society by separation. In an offensive mode, cognitive retrenchment seeks to re-conquer secular society, actively opposing its values in an attempt to convert both the masses and the polity to its way of thinking.<sup>50</sup> This last option reflects many recent descriptions of contemporary fundamentalism, especially those movements associated with radical Islamism and the New Christian Right, both of which respond to what they see as a corrupt society by attempting to overhaul the social order, either by revolution or reform.

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<sup>50</sup> Penning and Smidt, *Evangelicalism*, pp. 36-7, drawing from Peter Berger, *A Far Glory. The Quest for Faith in an Age of Credulity* (New York: The Free Press, 1992), pp. 41-5.

Penning and Smidt claim that Berger's account of the various options described above demonstrates the subtlety of his work, that he 'realizes that responses to modernity do not fall along a neat, single continuum that connects two polar ends'.<sup>51</sup> And yet there remains throughout Berger's work a certain unquestioned assumption that conservative religion and modernity represent two almost diametrically opposed forces in the contemporary world. While movements like evangelicalism may converse with modern culture and survive, maybe even thrive, this is only possible if they affirm and sustain a mode of engagement characterised by a thorough denial of modernity's values and an uncompromising defence of their own boundaries. Mutual survival is possible, but only at the cost of struggle, and there are strong suggestions in Berger's later work that the religious groups which emerge triumphant do so because they successfully fend off those influences most centrally associated with western modernity.

An alternative perspective, which challenges this basic assumption in Berger's work, has emerged in the work of Christian Smith, who characterises contemporary evangelicalism as an 'engaged orthodoxy'. This is the term that Smith uses to describe the approach to Christian faith expressed by the so-called neo-evangelicals who reacted against fundamentalist separatism in the USA during the 1940s. These men, including Carl F. H. Henry, Charles Fuller and Billy Graham, came to have an enormous influence over the development of evangelicalism through the later twentieth century, and distinguished themselves from their fundamentalist forebears by remaining

...fully committed to maintaining and promoting confidently traditional, orthodox Protestant theology and belief, while at the same time becoming confidently and proactively engaged in the intellectual, cultural, social, and political life of the nation.<sup>52</sup>

They remained committed both to orthodoxy and to cultural engagement at the same time, and in this distinguished themselves from liberal Protestants on the one hand, and from the increasingly sectarian fundamentalists on the other. As the neo-evangelicals gained strength, not least through the National Association of Evangelicals and Fuller Theological Seminary, but also through various other seminaries, missions, periodicals and publishing houses, so they came increasingly to shape the contours of the US evangelical movement, so that the 'spirit of engaged orthodoxy' became 'incarnate in one giant, national transdenominational network of evangelical organizations'.<sup>53</sup>

Smith's aim in his book *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving* is to examine what has become of the engaged orthodoxy of the evangelical movement after the years of social, religious and political upheaval which followed the ascendancy of the neo-evangelical agenda. He builds on an ambitious national

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<sup>51</sup> Penning and Smidt, *Evangelicalism*, p. 37.

<sup>52</sup> Christian Smith, *American Evangelicalism. Embattled and Thriving* (Chicago, IL and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 10.

<sup>53</sup> Smith, *American Evangelicalism*, p. 13.

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survey of US evangelicals and produces an account that challenges the work of both Berger and Hunter on empirical and theoretical grounds. On the former, Smith attempts to demonstrate the vitality of contemporary US evangelicalism, thus putting to rest notions of its encroaching demise or liberalisation in the face of a dominant modernity. He does this by appealing to a variety of factors, all of which, he argues, are important in gauging the strength of a religious movement, and compares their levels among evangelicals with those among fundamentalists, mainline Christians, liberals and Catholics. On all factors, including robustness of faith, group participation, commitment to mission and retention and recruitment of new members, Smith finds that evangelicals show levels of commitment and activism comparable to, but in many cases well above, those of Christians falling within the other categories.<sup>54</sup> He also finds no evidence to suggest younger evangelicals are less orthodox than the older generations, therefore challenging the liberalisation argument grounded in Hunter's work.<sup>55</sup>

So why does US evangelicalism show so many signs of relative vitality? Here Smith makes a significant break with sociologists who have preceded him, specifically in arguing that it is, in part, the engaged nature of evangelical orthodoxy that makes it such a strong religious movement. Directly opposing the Bergerian position, Smith finds no evidence that suggests evangelicals thrive because of their relative distance from the forces of modernity, citing the high numbers of evangelicals who have benefited from higher education, who have a relatively high income, and who are participants in the paid labour force.<sup>56</sup> He also finds that there is no difference between the major American Protestant traditions in their degree of encapsulation in Christian friendship and associate networks, thus undermining the argument that evangelicals fend off the social consequences of modernity by forging closed social groupings at the local level.<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, he finds reason to question Kelley's strictness theory, as the fundamentalist Christians in his sample show significantly lower levels of religious strength than the evangelicals.<sup>58</sup>

In seeking an alternative explanation, Smith turns to the insights associated with the influential work of Stephen Warner, who formulates a distinction between the old, Bergerian account of encroaching secularisation, with religious groups thriving in so far as they successfully ward off the forces of the modern world, and the 'new

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<sup>54</sup> Smith, *American Evangelicalism*, pp. 20-66.

<sup>55</sup> Smith, *American Evangelicalism*, p. 26. While impressive for the way it takes into account a variety of salient dimensions that moves beyond many previous studies, Smith's analysis of evangelical vitality arguably relies a little too uncritically on a particular notion of Christian orthodoxy. His understanding of what is 'theologically orthodox' is most reflective of a stereotypically evangelical model (e.g. on human nature as sinful, on p. 22), so that when commitment to orthodoxy is used as one gauge of religious strength in demonstrating evangelical vitality, there is a risk that one aspect of the argument may have some circularity to it (e.g. see pp. 22, 26, 52).

<sup>56</sup> Smith, *American Evangelicalism*, pp. 75-6.

<sup>57</sup> Smith, *American Evangelicalism*, p. 82.

<sup>58</sup> Smith, *American Evangelicalism*, p. 85.



paradigm', which seeks to explain the vitality of religion in terms of its place within a pluralistic spiritual marketplace.<sup>59</sup> Some associate the old paradigm with Western Europe and view the new paradigm as quintessentially North American, not least in being grounded in a grassroots free market that owes much to the separation of church and state. Smith finds much of value in the new paradigm competitive marketing theory associated with scholars like Roger Finke and Rodney Stark,<sup>60</sup> especially as it acknowledges the significance of religious activism, entrepreneurialism and empowerment that has clearly been so crucial to the historical vicissitudes of the US evangelical movement. However, rather than focus on how evangelicals relate to their competitors, Smith attempts to develop the new paradigm by offering an account of the orientation of evangelical Christians to the '*sociocultural pluralistic world they inhabit*',<sup>61</sup> and refers to this in explaining their relative vitality.

For Smith, key to the evangelical response to modernity is the impulse to draw clear symbolic boundaries, thus distinguishing believers from relevant 'outgroups', including secular culture and other religious traditions. In this he is perfectly consistent with Berger's spectrum of responses, from cognitive retrenchment to cognitive surrender, but while Berger, and Hunter in his work, tends to paint religion as a relatively passive force, fending off the forces of modernity from a defensive position, Smith highlights the drives internal to evangelicalism which foster an orientation characterised by *active engagement* with the world. Moreover, this active engagement – which Smith finds both in the mission projects of evangelical organisations as well as in the lives of ordinary evangelicals he interviewed – appears to include a capacity for a strategic re-negotiation of collective identity, in light of the changing socio-cultural environments that evangelicals confront. In other words, evangelicals *do* accommodate their position in response to cultural change, but part of this process of accommodation involves a revitalisation of evangelical identity, not least by focusing on new sources of opposition. Smith contrasts the anti-communism and anti-Catholicism of previous generations with the opposition to moral relativism and homosexual rights in more recent decades. An adjustment is evident, but a strong sense of evangelical identity boundaries remains firmly intact.

Moreover, modernity's pluralism offers evangelicals a favourable environment in which to thrive because it 'creates a situation in which evangelicals can perpetually maintain but can never resolve their struggle with the non-evangelical world'.<sup>62</sup> It is this struggle, which previous commentators have often interpreted as an index of weakness, which Smith argues actually generates vitality, at the same time reinforcing evangelicalism's boundaries while continually creating opportunities for

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<sup>59</sup> Warner, 'Work in Progress'.

<sup>60</sup> E.g. see Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America 1776-1990. Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992).

<sup>61</sup> Smith, *American Evangelicalism*, p. 88 (original emphasis).

<sup>62</sup> Smith, *American Evangelicalism*, p. 150.

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engagement with a wider culture in need of redemption. Smith summarises his position thus,

American evangelicalism, we contend, is strong not because it is shielded against, but because it is – or at least perceives itself to be – embattled with forces that seem to oppose or threaten it. Indeed, evangelicalism, we suggest, *thrives* on distinction, engagement, tension, conflict, and threat. Without these, evangelicalism would lose its identity and purpose and grow languid and aimless.<sup>63</sup>

### **Congregational Studies and the Sociology of Community**

In fully accounting for this dynamic, Smith argues that we need to move beyond structural and ecological factors alone, and develops a theoretical approach to evangelical collective identity that builds on subcultural identity theory, useful in part because it ‘compels us to analyze the cultural content of religious discourse, subcultural narratives, and theological rationales for this-worldly action’.<sup>64</sup> In other words, it highlights the importance of taking into account factors emerging from the evangelical worldview itself, and not just external forces impinging on it, in explaining how evangelicals cope with contemporary culture. This is why Smith places such great emphasis on engaged orthodoxy, which he presents as an orientation with theological roots that has profound sociological consequences. It is in the social application of their orientation that evangelicals demonstrate their capacity to thrive in the modern world, a world that is both an object of mission and a site of perpetual struggle.

Smith’s approach to evangelicalism and its relationship to the modern world has much to recommend it, especially within the context of this book, and for two different reasons. First, it offers a method of dealing with plausibility that moves beyond the constraints of a traditional Bergerian sociology of knowledge. Evangelical communities are not presented as inevitably beleaguered enclaves, capitulating to the modern world simply by virtue of engaging with it. Rather, the very nature of that engagement is taken seriously, and it is allowed to be flexible, creative and entrepreneurial, a potential source of vitality, rejuvenation and change. As well as thereby providing a theoretically more potent and ultimately more illuminating method, Smith’s perspective is also more aligned with the realities of evangelicalism as reported by historians of its development.<sup>65</sup> Second, Smith’s subcultural approach lends itself well to an analysis of interaction and community on a smaller scale, and may therefore be a useful tool in congregational studies.

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<sup>63</sup> Smith, *American Evangelicalism*, p. 89 (original emphasis).

<sup>64</sup> Smith, *American Evangelicalism*, p. 151.

<sup>65</sup> E.g. see Nathan Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989); Mark A. Noll, David W. Bebbington and George A. Rawlyk (eds) *Evangelicalism. Comparative Studies of Popular Protestantism in North America, the British Isles, and Beyond, 1700-1990* (New York and Oxford: OUP, 1994).

Congregational studies has emerged across various disciplines during the past twenty years or so, with numerous studies bringing a variety of methods to bare on the nature, status, social and theological significance of Christian congregations.<sup>66</sup> Some, such as those by James Hopewell<sup>67</sup> and Al Dowie,<sup>68</sup> have used ethnographic methods from the social sciences to access the identity or culture of specific congregations, and then used the emerging insights in probing theological questions. Such an approach can be particularly fruitful in arriving at an empirically informed understanding of tricky ecclesiastical issues, such as the authority of leaders, or in reflecting on the possibilities of pastoral ministry in light of the power dynamics of a particular congregation. Other congregational studies have been concerned with more traditionally sociological questions, and have examined specific congregations in order to arrive at a better understanding of how they function as communities and what studying them tells us about the broader religious landscape. This was the preoccupation of Nancy Ammerman's large scale study *Congregation and Community*, which studied the life of twenty-three North American congregations located in social contexts which were in some way engaged in a process of transition.<sup>69</sup> Her aim was to examine how congregations respond to social change, and in order to do this, she adopted what she calls an 'ecological' approach, viewing the local congregation as part of a complex network of human forces, shaped by and shaping salient processes of economic, ethnic, social and cultural change.

This study is not primarily concerned with the local networks in which St Michael-le-Belfrey is embedded, because it is a church whose historically and geographically distant linkages are arguably more important, as will be discussed in the following chapters. However, I do follow Ammerman in treating this particular congregation as a living network of 'meaning and activity, constructed by the individual and collective agents who inhabit and sustain [it]'.<sup>70</sup> In this sense my study is a sociological one, concerned with issues of collective identity, changing belief and the nature of community. As suggested above, St Michael's may be viewed as relatively self-contained with respect to its immediate geographical context, but it exists within a network of connections, memories and reputations which renders the congregation especially exposed to the cultural flows of secular modernity, thus evoking the well-trodden theoretical paths of Berger *et al*, as detailed above. My key question in this book may be summarised as, how do members of the St Michael's congregation relate such forces to their individual and collective identities as evangelicals? This inevitably provokes the questions of resistance and accommodation described earlier, but I would argue that in

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<sup>66</sup> For a survey of the field, see Mathew Guest, Karin Tusting and Linda Woodhead (eds), *Congregational Studies in the UK. Christianity in a Post-Christian Context* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004).

<sup>67</sup> James F. Hopewell, *Congregation. Stories and Structures* (London: SCM Press, 1988).

<sup>68</sup> Al Dowie, *Interpreting Culture in a Scottish Congregation* (New York: Lang, 2002).

<sup>69</sup> Nancy T. Ammerman *et al*, *Congregation and Community* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997).

<sup>70</sup> Ammerman *et al*, *Congregation and Community*, p. 346.

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addressing the reality of these processes within a congregational setting, one is dealing with them not as purely individual matters, but issues pertinent to an understanding of evangelical community. This is in perfect keeping with Berger's position, which implies that cultural accommodation leads to secularisation through the fragmentation of religious communities. More precisely, the shift to a set of positions which rely upon the diffuse standards of culture, rather than the defined standards of a closed religious group, compromises the possibilities of sustaining cohesive and durable collectives.<sup>71</sup> Accommodation to modernity is also associated with individualism, with the primacy of choice and autonomy, rather than on interdependence and long-term commitment to organised groups, least of all religious ones. Modernisation and community are, apparently, inversely related and world-accommodating evangelical groups are doomed to fragmentation and decline.

As we shall see in the following chapters, this argument is highly problematic, not least because it fails to take account of the precise way in which a religious community might engage with modernity, a question at the heart of Smith's subcultural perspective. Moreover, the symbolic construction of community within a congregation is far more complicated than this account allows, drawing from local history, norms of leadership and, as Smith acknowledges, discourses internal to that congregation. Smith focuses on engaged orthodoxy as a pan-tradition quintessential to evangelicalism; I will explore how this is manifest in the culture of St Michael's, but also draw attention to other internally constructed discourses, shared traditions which have exerted a significant influence over the life of the congregation and over how it has related to the culture in which it is situated. The prologue which preceded this chapter has already illustrated how the public life of this congregation is both diverse and complex; what I want to argue in the following chapters is how such complexity constitutes a response to internal discourses and external forces, and how these express shifting perceptions of evangelical authenticity. Moreover, following Smith, I want to highlight how modes of cultural engagement adopted by this congregation have shaped changing understandings of evangelical identity. In this sense, my overall intention is to explore how modernity both shapes evangelical tradition, while simultaneously offering new channels for its reinvention in the lives of believers.

One further note needs to be made about method, and that relates to my approach to the congregation as an object of study. My interest is in the culture of the congregation, and this I take not to be something that is separable from its everyday life, but as emerging from the processes of interaction that occur between its members. Here I draw from approaches to community popularised in anthropology, particularly the work of Anthony Cohen. Cohen conceives of community as a collection of people united in their attachment to a common body of symbols, symbols which may be iconic or material, but may just as well be social and elusive. But while these individuals are united in the symbols to which they are attached, they may nevertheless relate to those symbols in a variety of different ways; such is

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<sup>71</sup> Bruce, *God is Dead*, p. 239.

to acknowledge the very real commonality at the heart of community, but also the diversity of human experience.<sup>72</sup> The same insight can be applied to congregations, and with the same implications, namely, that any suggestion that their identity is based on consensus is a misplaced reification of something far more complicated, and that symbols, as the main building blocks of community, are malleable, imprecise and multivocal. They may mean many things to many different people. This reflects my approach to evangelicalism in this book, as a common body of symbols, which is open to a range of interpretations and patterns of embodiment. In terms of a definition, I follow David Bebbington, who conceives of evangelicalism in terms of

...the four qualities that have been the special marks of Evangelical religion: *conversionism*, the belief that lives need to be changed; *activism*, the expression of the gospel in effort; *biblicism*, a particular regard for the Bible; and what may be called *crucicentrism*, a stress on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. Together they form a quadrilateral of priorities that is the basis of Evangelicalism.<sup>73</sup>

Bebbington's fourfold scheme has the advantage of tallying with numerous other attempts at defining evangelicalism,<sup>74</sup> whilst also drawing attention to *activism*, thus distinguishing practical as well as substantive theological dimensions. Bebbington's scheme is also sufficiently loose to allow for changes in emphasis over time and in different contexts, highlighting key axes rather than a fixed set of credal statements. Conceiving evangelical priorities as axes – or, using Cohen's language, as a common body of symbols – from which social manifestations radiate – emerging, evolving and interacting with other elements and contexts – allows for a much richer appreciation of evangelical identity and evangelical culture. Treating the congregation as a key context for the negotiation of this culture allows us to address a malleable tradition within identifiable communal boundaries.

It is important not to adopt Cohen's insights ahistorically; these interpretations of evangelical tradition are not unconstrained and, as the following chapter will show, this openness among evangelicals has taken on particular patterns during the twentieth century, shaped by a recent history of cultural accommodation. But Cohen's theory of community does allow one to treat congregations in a very particular way, and in fact allows the tension and struggle that Christian Smith

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<sup>72</sup> Anthony P. Cohen, *The Symbolic Construction of Community* (Chichester: Ellis Horwood, 1985).

<sup>73</sup> Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, pp. 2-3.

<sup>74</sup> For example, see definitions in George Marsden, 'Evangelicalism and Fundamental Christianity', in Mircea Eliade (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, Vol. 5 (New York: Macmillan, 1987), pp. 190-7; Richard Quebedeaux, *The Worldly Evangelicals* (San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, 1978), p. 7; Mark Shibley, 'Contemporary Evangelicals: Born Again and World Affirming', *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 558 (1998), pp. 67-87.

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identifies at the heart of evangelical tradition to achieve a more prominent place in the story of the individual congregation.

First, it is necessary to look closer at that tradition, specifically, at how it has evolved in the British context in recent decades, for this provides the context for the local developments explored in later chapters.

### **A Note on the Structure of the Book**

Now that I have discussed the theoretical debates in which this study will be embedded, and stated the key research questions, the remainder of this book will be occupied with exploring these questions within the context of the empirical data gathered on the life of St Michael-le-Belfrey, which the author studied in 1999-2000 as part of an extended period of ethnographic fieldwork. An account of this process is provided in appendix one.

Chapter two examines the relationship between modernity and the evangelical movement in Britain, charting developments from the 1960s onwards. In this respect it explores ideas dealt with in more abstract terms in this chapter, but as they have been expressed in the lives of British evangelicals during the latter half of the twentieth century. Following this examination of the national picture, chapter three offers an introduction to the case study, exploring trends in growth and decline, and key demographic features. The aim here is to explore the ways in which St Michael-le-Belfrey is embedded in processes of change characteristic of contemporary British culture and of the broader evangelical movement. Chapters four and five take two emerging issues and address them in detail, exploring how internal diversity and subjective expressions of identity are socially manifest among the St Michael's congregation. Questionnaire data is used alongside interviews and ethnographic description to explore the ways in which the beliefs of individuals are negotiated in light of shared public discourses, and how this impacts on a sense of unity and collective identity. Chapter five also addresses charismatic phenomena such as glossolalia and words of knowledge, seeking to examine how the personal experiences of congregants are expressed through public rituals.

Chapter six is devoted to the *Visions* group. I present an analysis of the ways in which *Visions* continues to reconfigure and rebuild the core aspects of its evangelical heritage, focusing on how authority is defused, on the mobilisation of the aesthetic and on the reconfiguration of shared values. This discussion is set within the context of wider debates about the nature of post-evangelicalism and the so-called 'emerging church'. Chapter seven examines the use of the small group meeting across the life of the St Michael's congregation, with a special focus upon how shared cultures are defined and sustained in communal meetings. After examining the ways in which members of various groups demonstrate practical commitment and an ongoing contribution to networks of support, I relate the emerging experiences of community to the patterns of shared belief and value addressed earlier. The concluding chapter relates the local findings presented to broader debates about the future of evangelical Christianity.

*Evangelical Identity and Contemporary Culture*

Throughout the book, lengthy quotations from literature, interview transcripts, from my field journals or field notes, are set apart from the text in normal type. All of the church members I refer to or quote in the following pages have been given pseudonyms, for obvious reasons of confidentiality, aside from recent incumbents of St Michael-le-Belfrey, whose names are given as the name of the church is given also (see appendix one for an account of the reasons for this). I have done my utmost to remove details which might make individuals easily identifiable, without sacrificing important contextual information. Quotations from the Bible all refer to the New International Version (NIV), as this version is favoured by St Michael's parishioners and is the one set in the pews each Sunday.

## CHAPTER 8

### The Bigger Picture

The preceding chapters have presented an analysis of a single church. Occasional cross references to cognate developments have furnished something of a broader context, but this book has, for the most part, been concerned with St Michael-le-Belfrey. I make no apologies for this; St Michael's is a complex and fascinating church with a rich history and as such deserves close attention. Its significant influence over the evangelical tradition as expressed in congregations across the UK and further a field is another strong justification for a book-length analysis. I have attempted to paint a detailed picture of congregational life in St Michael's around the turn of the millennium, grounding this in an analysis of its history as a centre of evangelical revival. My chief aim throughout has been to explore the ways in which this church has successfully negotiated the challenges of contemporary western culture, while maintaining a strong sense of Christian community. While in many ways this has produced a single snap-shot, I have nevertheless attempted to examine processes of longitudinal change, in so far as my research has permitted this, by looking at how St Michael's has evolved since the 1960s. Further reflections on how it has developed since the time of my original research may be found in the Epilogue immediately following this chapter, which assesses the state of St Michael-le-Belfrey in 2006.

My reasons for offering an extended analysis of a single church are also methodological, and reflect my preference for in depth ethnography, based on participant observation. As chapter 3 shows, while St Michael's has generally continued to claim the same evangelical priorities throughout its recent history, it has embodied these convictions in a variety of different ways. Evangelical community (or 'fellowship'), for example, has been a persistent emphasis, and yet when filtered through the community structures embodied in home groups, households, worship groups, Alpha, *Visions*, and a variety of congregational models, it becomes a multi-faceted entity, capable of absorbing a range of theological undercurrents, social conventions and implicit moral assumptions, all embedded in the narrative histories shared among the congregation.<sup>1</sup> Similar comments could be made about worship, evangelism, social outreach, leadership and the Holy Spirit. The process of interpreting evangelical Christianity's common body of symbols, to use the language employed in chapter 1, is rooted in an

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<sup>1</sup> In sociological terms, this is built on the assumption that evangelicals are social actors, rather than simply embodiments of a clearly defined tradition.



### *The Bigger Picture*

experience of how these symbols are embodied within congregational contexts. A multi-perspectival approach rooted in participant observation allows a proper consideration of this and an extended account allows for the necessary detail. Moreover, as I have been persuaded that many other congregational studies have painted only partial pictures of church life on account of their brevity, over-theorization or heavy dependence on quantitative methods, I would be remiss not to at least attempt something detailed and ambitious here. I leave it to readers to assess the extent to which this has been a successful exercise.

My discussion of evangelical identity and contemporary culture would, however, be incomplete (not to say undeserving of its title) without some attempt to relate its chief findings to broader trends in the evangelical world and reflect on the questions they might raise for future research.

### **Evangelical Networks and Markets**

The foregoing analysis finds common ground with what many scholars have previously noted about the ongoing accommodation of evangelicalism to contemporary western culture. The boundaries that were previously guarded with caution have since been challenged and evangelicals have allowed their beliefs and practices to be coloured by changing cultural norms and mores, from the absorption of pop subcultures and technologies into worship to the adaptation of popular Christian morality to an ethic of civility grounded in tolerance. Opinions differ on the consequences of this process for the strength of the evangelical movement, including the cohesion of evangelical congregations, but many paint a picture characterised by decline and eventual disintegration. The previous chapters illustrate how an understanding of discourses emerging from within, as well as impinging upon, individual congregations may foster a more subtle analysis. Indeed, a consideration of St Michael-le-Belfrey suggests that cultural accommodation – theorised in earlier chapters as liberalisation and subjectivisation – does not necessarily erode or fragment religious communities. Rather, these processes are filtered by mediating structures, shaped by demography, locality and the history of individual groups. They are also subject to processes of negotiation within the confines of local cultures, and thus to processes of social interaction. The omission of these factors is raised as a problem with Peter Berger's work in an essay originally drafted by James Davison Hunter, and published as part of a collaborative work along with Robert Wuthnow, Albert Bergesen and Edith Kurzweil.<sup>2</sup> The authors point to the way in which Berger assumes a relatively straightforward relationship between identity and social structure. Changes in primary institutions, such as education or the workplace, are assumed to affect changes in the consciousness of individuals. This is no doubt the case, but Berger implies that these

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Wuthnow, James Davison Hunter, Albert Bergesen and Edith Kurzweil, *Cultural Analysis. The Work of Peter L. Berger, Mary Douglas, Michel Foucault and Jürgen Habermas* (London: Routledge, 1984), pp. 21-76.

changes amount to a direct, almost logical response to the nature of structural conditions. For example, technology induces a worldview that stresses the componentiality of reality, bureaucracy the sequential, predictability of life.<sup>3</sup> What Berger does not do is explore the mediating structures which channel these relationships and shape the effect of one factor upon the other.

Berger's theory, it would seem, could profit greatly from a more systematic discussion of the different empirical relationships between the contents of socialization and different social structural configurations – the structural bases of personality.<sup>4</sup>

Chapters 4 and 5 present a clear vindication of this point. Why does liberalisation fail to fragment the St Michael's congregation? Because diversity is celebrated and differences likely to cause fracture are papered over in *public* discourse. Why does subjectivisation within St Michael's not lead to atomisation and the fragmentation of community? Because subjectivity generates narratives which require *communal* channels of expression in order to secure meaning. In other words, the effects of these two processes upon the convictions of members are shaped by the *communicative culture of the congregation*. Chapter 7 took this argument a step further in suggesting that small groups not only serve as contexts for the legitimisation of shared beliefs, but occupy a key role in the socialisation of new members into the dominant discourse of the church. In performing this role, they largely re-affirm the patterns of liberalisation and subjectivisation expressed elsewhere, while also fostering intimacy and mutual support among members. *Visions* stands as a decidedly different case, its reliance upon sub-cultural markers and its reactionary stance against its parent tradition call attention to the way in which these mid-level factors shape movements of innovation. Its use of technology, for example, cannot be understood without reference to the artistic heritage of the charismatic tradition and the group's post-evangelical perspective on person-based authority. Given the increasing popularity of small groups, especially as organised around the cell church model (see the Epilogue), future research will need to explore the role these groups play in evangelical churches. How do small groups function as mediating structures for the values communicated within congregations, and what role might they play in the negotiation of tensions or the resolution of conflict? What kind of community *experience* do they foster, and where does it stand *vis-à-vis* the Sunday service?

A consideration of mediating structures uncovers the shortcomings of the Bergerian model in accounting for the socialization of congregants into group values. In highlighting the role that small group meetings play in this process, we draw attention to an obvious example, which can easily be seen to filter structural influences by virtue of their status as secondary institutions, neither fully institutionalised nor hierarchical, and yet organised, regular and communal. In this

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<sup>3</sup> Peter Berger, Brigitte Berger and Hansfried Kellner, *The Homeless Mind. Modernization and Consciousness* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), pp. 29-61.

<sup>4</sup> Wuthnow *et al*, *Cultural Analysis*, p. 71.

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respect, small groups represent an intermediate layer of collective activity, subsumed within the organisational structures of the congregation, but also semi-autonomous in so far as emerging discourses are in part a product of member interaction. Peter Collins has examined a similar dimension to the culture of Quakerism, drawing a distinction between canonical, vernacular and individual narratives as axes in relation to which Quaker identity is continually negotiated. The canonical refers to officially sanctioned ideas enshrined in texts and traditions authorised by the Quaker movement, whereas individual narratives emerge from the specific experiences of particular members. Vernacular narratives are the stories and meanings shared among members of a local meeting; like the evangelical small group, they provide a site for the collective negotiation of common ideas and values in light of both individual experience and a body of authoritative religious tradition.<sup>5</sup> But mediating structures need not always be vernacular, local or subsumed within larger congregational structures. In our late modern culture, in which traditional understandings of identity and community are constantly challenged, it is unsurprising that the ideas and values that issue from conventional institutions are filtered through a range of social forces that are altogether less fixed, less predictable and less bounded than we might have expected in a previous time. In taking account of the processes whereby evangelical identities are constructed and maintained, we continually encounter not just congregations, small groups or other discrete gatherings, but also networks, markets, and other transcongregational phenomena which are less bound by geographical locality or traditional authorities. While the existence of evangelical Christianity at this meta level is nothing new, the conditions of late modernity have heightened the prevalence and power of translocal networks to shape social life and influence social values. Some would go as far as to argue that the strong correlation between religious beliefs and community, associated with the sociology of Bryan Wilson and Peter Berger, is actually an historical contingency. According to Rob Hirst, for example, in late modernity, 'overarching religious world views' are not necessarily dependent on strong, cohesive communities in the traditional sense, but 'may be held and maintained by members of *discrete networks* which need not be local'.<sup>6</sup>

While it is not possible to test Hirst's claim here, it raises an important question for future research and highlights the power of networks within the current cultural context. I would not go as far as to say that networks are supplanting local communities, but they certainly add a further significant dimension to the process whereby identities emerge from within religious institutions. Within late modernity, evangelical ideas are negotiated within a far more complex, intricate and international network than ever before and this network not only shapes the

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<sup>5</sup> Peter Collins, 'Congregations, Narratives and Identity: A Quaker Case Study', in Mathew Guest, Karin Tusting and Linda Woodhead (eds), *Congregational Studies in the UK: Christianity in a Post-Christian Context* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), pp. 99-112.

<sup>6</sup> Rob Hirst, 'Social Networks and Personal Beliefs: An Example from Modern Britain', in G. Davie, P. Heelas and L. Woodhead (eds), *Predicting Religion. Christian, Secular and Alternative Futures* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), p. 88 (original emphases).

construction of evangelicalism as a global phenomenon, but also infiltrates the construction of evangelical identity within local congregations. In this sense, mediating structures need to be reconceived and the maintenance of religious values addressed using a new set of theoretical tools.

There are good reasons for saying that the evangelical movement is more radically shaped by translocal networks than any other faction within contemporary Christianity. The UK's largest, most thriving churches are typically evangelical and highly active, boasting lay-empowered programmes of evangelism and social action. This is certainly the case with St Michael-le-Belfrey and its scale and ambition means that networks emerge from *within* the congregation as convenient organisational media for these activities. The prominence of elective parochials among the congregation, demonstrated in earlier chapters, also highlights the presence of numerous *nodes* that offer points of contact with related networks. Those individuals who attend occasionally serve as channels of communication with other churches and denominations; those who stay for short periods convey the social capital endowed by their previous church, just as they pass on that acquired in St Michael's to their next. Increased geographical movement among evangelical congregations – often propelled by the upward mobility of their membership – heightens the importance of dispersed personal networks as it generates channels of communication, support and the cross-fertilisation of ideas among those who share a common set of Christian convictions. Indeed, the alternative worship movement emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s in this precise manner. Mobile, creative and impassioned young evangelicals scattered across the UK found themselves inspired by the Nine O'Clock Service in Sheffield, but had no access to its resources, and so built their own tradition of ritual, worship and Christian fellowship extemporaneously, through personal networks consolidated through mutual visits, festival gatherings, occasional conferences and, later on, web-based interaction. Its momentum as a grass-roots movement has partly depended upon the ability of its participants to sustain personal networks on a national and increasingly international level.

In a more formal sense, the Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship (UCCF) continues to exert a highly significant influence over the life of evangelical students within UK universities, fostering a network of Christian Unions held together by their commitment to a shared doctrinal statement and mission-centred ethos. Networks emerge around the various evangelical festivals, built up informally through the regular gatherings of believers, but often also in a more intentional fashion, with a central hub facilitating a wide-ranging programme of events, resources and training available to local churches sympathetic to a given set of Christian values. A good example would be New Wine, which was established by David Pytches, one-time vicar of St Andrew's, Chorleywood, in the late 1980s. Pytches had been a bishop in Chile and longed for the church in the UK to experience the spontaneous expansion he had witnessed in South America. Inspired by John Wimber's signs and wonders theology, particularly his teaching that growth emerges when ordinary Christians are equipped with the gifts of the Holy Spirit,

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Pytches sought to promote this outlook among UK churches through a series of conferences offering seminars, worship and Bible teaching for all ages. New Wine has subsequently expanded its activities to include Leaders' Retreats (run in many different countries), Soul Survivor (a separate initiative to cover its burgeoning youth work), and New Wine Networks (gathering together church leaders into local networks to share New Wine values). Numerous evangelical organisations have emerged in a similar fashion, including Christian Voice and Reform, which function as campaign-based groups. Parachurch organisations like the Evangelical Alliance and World Vision, while older and more complex, serve as rallying points within evangelical networks, looked to for benchmarks of legitimacy and for guidance on appropriate expressions of Christian charity. The World Wide Web expands the networking possibilities associated with these organisations immeasurably, adding email discussion, blogs, online forums and chat-rooms to the usual seminars and annual conferences.

In addition to formal and informal networks, there is another dimension to the transcongregational layer of evangelical communication which, to use an economic metaphor, primarily concerns processes of production rather than consumption. That is, it refers not to personal networks as media through which evangelical ideas flow and are shared, but to the powerful, transnational structures from which these ideas often nowadays emerge. One crucial factor here is the passage of influence that flows across the Atlantic and there is important future research to be done on the Anglo-American evangelical tradition and its hegemonic status within the global movement. This trend has long established roots: from the time of George Whitefield and John Wesley, evangelicalism has had a transatlantic flavour, with travelling preachers and influential authors maintaining a flow of influence and exchange across the subsequent centuries. One may find examples of how US evangelicalism has exerted significant influence over the British churches in the recent history of St Michael-le-Belfrey. The famous schism in 1980, which resulted in the establishment of the breakaway Acomb Christian Fellowship, was partly triggered by the importation of teachings on prophecy and authority, newly embraced by those who had been attending an independent evangelical church which submitted to the authority of leaders based in Florida. John Wimber, who subsequently had huge influence over the charismatic movement in Britain, embarked in 1981 on his first ministerial visit to this country partly at the invitation of David Watson, who had met him during a recent visit to Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California. This flow of ideas and influence is well established and played a particularly important role in the development of the theology of the House Church Movement during the 1970s.<sup>7</sup> The flow of influence has also worked in both directions, with numerous British evangelical authors successfully penetrating the US movement, key figures being C.S. Lewis, John Stott

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<sup>7</sup> Nigel Scotland, 'Evangelicalism and the Charismatic Movement (UK)', in Craig Bartholomew *et al* (eds), *The Futures of Evangelicalism. Issues and Prospects* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2003), pp. 284-5.

and David Watson, and perhaps more recently, Steve Chalke. What distinguishes the character of this phenomenon in recent years is the extent to which global politico-economic forces have become vehicles for this flow of evangelical capital, which has thereby achieved greater circulation and, in turn, greater social significance.

One of the most striking examples of this development is the evangelical publishing industry, which increasingly operates within a globalized environment, targeted at a niche market. The tools of marketing associated with the secular world of business are here deployed in the promotion of an evangelical worldview on an international stage. Well-known evangelical authors such as John Stott, Gerald Coates and Adrian Plass achieve celebrity status through their popular appeal, emerging as brand names within the Christian publishing industry, and while publishing houses like Inter-Varsity Press and Kingsway benefit from enhancing the appeal of their books to the Christian market, branded authors build their reputation and that of their church by gaining an international platform for their teaching.<sup>8</sup>

In terms of book sales, the major growth areas continue to be spirituality and devotionalism, but the globalisation of evangelical publishing has also occupied less obvious genres, including the fictional thriller. For example, the phenomenally successful *Left Behind* novels, by minister Tim LaHaye and author Jerry B. Jenkins, intentionally tap into apocalyptic themes in the evangelical imagination and actively teach a premillennialist message through the compelling medium of an adventure story. The dazzling, glamorous methods of the popular media – now including three movie adaptations – are used to great effect in the promulgation of a clear evangelical message, structured around the rapture, tribulation, coming and then defeat of the anti-Christ, followed by eschatological judgement, all embedded within a story of ordinary citizens facing the calamities of these tumultuous end times. *Left Behind* is no exception in using mass media, including the internet, to promote products which carry an evangelical message. The evangelical publishing industry now extends well beyond the printed word, and a glance through UK Christian bookshops will reveal the abundance of evangelical software and audio-visual products, many of them of US origin, which serve as conveyors of an evangelicalism that circulates within a global market.

Closer to home, courses such as Alpha have triggered accusations of McDonaldization as Christian agencies have adopted the principles of calculability, efficiency, predictability and control that have become increasingly normative in other fields of culture.<sup>9</sup> Christianity is standardized, packaged and reconfigured into easily digestible bite sized portions; a convenience food for the late modern spiritual consumer. The dynamics of McDonaldization open up novel channels for the dissemination of Christian teaching, filtered through the material culture of the

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<sup>8</sup> Richard Bartholomew, 'Publishing, Celebrity, and the Globalisation of Conservative Protestantism', *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 21:1 (2006), pp. 1-13.

<sup>9</sup> George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society. An Investigation into the Changing Character of Contemporary Social Life* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press, 1996).

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market: books, videos, DVDs, car stickers, sweatshirts, all emblazoned with the Alpha brand. And like a corporate brand, Alpha is protected by its guardians at Holy Trinity, Brompton, who have used copyright law and their marketing capital to control the public image of Alpha and all it represents. The extraordinary wealth of HTB and the Alpha organisation has allowed them to advertise their product on billboards and on the side of city buses, so that Christianity has achieved a fresh visibility in our largely secularized Britain. Their successful use of marketing strategies has also engendered a standardization of the Christian message, in this case closely following the specific form of charismatic evangelicalism fostered in Holy Trinity. In this respect Alpha functions as a *normalizing force* within global Christianity, teaching, embodying and uncritically endorsing a form of evangelicalism that is presented as the true path to faith. In so far as Alpha has also successfully reinvigorated local congregations – its resources unsurprisingly embraced as a fresh and accessible source of teaching and spiritual guidance both within the evangelical world and beyond – it is increasingly triggering a standardization of congregational cultures. Like a business franchise, Alpha offers churches new opportunities for enrichment, but only if the brand is comprehensively endorsed, and this comes at a price.

Given the apparently ubiquitous influence of market forces, it is tempting to endorse Jeremy Carrette and Richard King's argument that economics is replacing science as the dominant discourse of our society and that the 'ideologies of consumerism and business enterprise are now infiltrating more and more aspects of our lives'.<sup>10</sup> Whether the co-opting of such ideologies into evangelical Christianity fosters social and political conservatism – encouraging individuals to remain compliant consumers rather than challenging the status quo – is a question for a different book to this one. What is striking is the extent to which such forces appear to have found a home within the evangelical movement and to have occupied a place from which they may increasingly infiltrate the life of evangelical congregations.

There are theological resources within Christian tradition that may be drawn from in justifying the legitimacy of social networks. The idea of the church being the body of Christ highlights common commitment to and relationship with Jesus as the basis of Christian fellowship, rather than geographical location or institutional affiliation as such. Indeed, this understanding is particularly popular among evangelicals, reflecting their passion for personal faith, a key identity marker distinguishing them from those more wedded to the Anglican parish system, or to institutions of priesthood or sacrament. Hence, dispersed networks lend themselves particularly well to the evangelical worldview and find a natural legitimacy among its members. Their apparent flexibility also appeals to the passion for ecclesiological innovation at the heart of evangelical tradition and their dependence upon inter-subjective engagement resonates with charismatic notions of the Spirit, flowing

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<sup>10</sup> Jeremy Carrette and Richard King, *Selling Spirituality. The Silent Takeover of Religion* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), p. 4.

through the body of Christ as an organic phenomenon, rather than within bricks and mortar. These factors may lie behind Pete Ward's positive appraisal of networks as ideal contexts for a 'liquid church' which, to be a 'true expression of the kingdom', needs to embody the forms of community that have emerged in late modernity.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, the affinity between such deep-seated evangelical themes and the fluid, more malleable forms of community popular in late modern culture invite serious questions about the propensity of the evangelical movement to thrive in the contemporary world. Those wishing to move beyond the assumptions of the traditional secularization paradigm might appeal to this affinity in developing a fresh theoretical framework for addressing issues of growth and decline.

But what does the importance of networks mean for the theoretical debates presented as central to the preceding analysis? Heelas and Woodhead argue that, in recent years, the resilience and adaptability of secondary institutions, such as small groups, new spiritual outlets and the institutions of 'soft' capitalism, suggest the clear distinction between primary and secondary institutions may be breaking down.<sup>12</sup> Both now appear central to the construction of identities in late modernity so that it is no longer meaningful to subordinate one to the other. I would concur with this argument, but wish to expand it by suggesting that the identity-defining power of primary institutions is also being challenged by networks and markets, so that religious identities are no longer primarily formed within churches, chapels or more informal home groups, but in relationship with a whole range of phenomena set above the level of the individual. While these include the traditional forms of community gathering mentioned here, they also include dispersed informal friendship groups, web-based discussion forums, national networks associated with festivals or conferences, and the various strands of the commercial evangelical market which generates a shared material culture circulating among a global populace.

The examples offered above provoke the question of whether evangelical networks and markets are now more powerful than denominations or local churches in defining evangelical identities, not to mention traditional authorities such as scripture or the reputable preacher. Indeed, these examples, while properly referred to as mediating structures (in so far as they shape the appropriation of evangelical tradition), are not *secondary* in any strict sense, for their relationship to evangelical communities is complex, and often axiomatic rather than ancillary as such. I would not suggest that the conventional structures of the congregation have been supplanted; evidence suggests the congregation will continue to be the axis of collective identity for most practising Christians for some time yet.<sup>13</sup> Rather, the

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<sup>11</sup> Pete Ward, *Liquid Church* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2002), pp. 10, 41.

<sup>12</sup> Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead, 'Homeless Minds Today?', in Linda Woodhead (ed.), *Peter Berger and the Study of Religion* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 69.

<sup>13</sup> Mathew Guest, 'Reconceiving the Congregation as a Source of Authenticity', in Jane Garnet *et al* (eds.), *Redefining Christian Britain. Post-1945 Perspectives* (London: SCM Press, 2007), pp. 63-72.



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evangelical congregation must be addressed not merely as a local Christian gathering, but as a potential site for the flow of ideas, products and behavioural conventions which circulate within a national, or even international, network. Future research will need to explore the extent to which congregations have become mere filters for forces operative at the level of the network, or whether networked relationships remain epiphenomenal to more regular and immediate encounters, supportive of congregationally driven values. If the former, then evangelical authority is unlikely to be as fixed or perhaps as accountable as it is often assumed to be, and congregational studies will need to address the extent to which this has a destabilising effect on congregational cultures, in deference to a more delocalised form of evangelical identity. Is the network overtaking the congregation as the dominant point of reference in the construction of evangelical identity, and what are the implications of this for the strength of the evangelical movement?

Here, Christian Smith's work may again be instructive, especially his argument that opportunities for evangelicals to struggle with the challenges of the wider culture do not engender secularization but foster vitality.<sup>14</sup> If evangelicals thrive on tension, difference and impassioned cultural engagement, as Smith suggests, might a transnational, dispersed network actually facilitate this more effectively than the traditional congregation? After all, to exist within such networks is to relinquish the comparatively enclosed boundaries of conventional congregational structures and participate in a larger, less predictable social field, occupied by a range of other discourses, some inimical to evangelical values. The network society arguably heightens awareness of the cultural and religious diversity that characterises our pluralistic world and, as such, offers a prime site for the struggles that Smith associates with the sustenance of evangelical vitality. Might networks foster growth, strength and empowerment? Might their global reference allow UK evangelicals to transcend the constraints of their post-Christian context? Smith's notion of 'engaged orthodoxy' opens up a whole range of possibilities for future analysis.

### **Subjectivity, Community and Culture**

While the question of networks and the globalisation of evangelicalism cannot be sidestepped, community continues to be a key value for British evangelicals. That is, the experience of being in fellowship with other evangelicals is still an important identity marker of being evangelical and is central to a sense of being authentically Christian, a sense perhaps heightened by the siege mentality common among those who see themselves as a remnant of believers in an otherwise secularised culture. But if community is important, what kind of community is this? Some light is shed on this question by reflecting on wider sociological debates about the nature of community in the late modern age. While it is widely argued that the fragmentation of the modern condition generates longings for community, it is also often assumed

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<sup>14</sup> Christian Smith, *American Evangelicalism. Embattled and Thriving* (Chicago, IL, and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 150.

that efforts to forge communities are doomed to failure because of the fragmentation of social life. This is an extreme position, based on Ferdinand Tönnies' notion of the *Gemeinschaft* as inversely related to the progression of modernisation.<sup>15</sup> However, it would be more consistent with the evidence to suggest a transformation or reinvention of community in the light of changing conditions. For example, Michel Maffesoli has spoken of 'neo-tribes', interest and lifestyle-based groups which emerge as a response to the heightened individualism of late modernity. They are unstable, maintained through shared beliefs and consumption practices rather than by conventional ascriptions such as class or regional identities.<sup>16</sup> His description suggests some affinity with the fledgling alternative worship network were it not for its local links with churches and the undeniably middle class status of its constituency. Moreover, as the example of *Visions* demonstrates, the relative isolation of groups can generate a particular kind of structure, characterised by tight boundaries and a close-knit membership. They have forged a community for themselves and thus escaped postmodern fragmentation, but their esoteric and elusive project has demanded its own logic and language, and both have emerged and been sustained among a relatively consistent core group with its own evangelical subculture, a point to which we shall later return.

To take a different example, the St Michael's home groups show less inwardness due to their being embedded in a larger structure, which assists in the provision of leadership, organisation and materials. Members participate in a larger, but proximate, culture while resolving questions and problems through face-to-face dialogue. In offering places in which the individual can be felt to 'be known', they arguably go some way towards making up for what Peter Berger once described as the 'underinstitutionalised' state of the private sphere.<sup>17</sup> But home groups function in the middle ground, as secondary institutions, and it is this which grants their distinctiveness. While sufficiently private to foster intimacy and familiarity, they are sufficiently public to allow communality and a *sharing of subjectivities*. Examples from the Alpha course in chapter 7 demonstrate how this sharing process includes references to external links – embedded in the networks and markets described in the previous section – and that this enhances a sense of legitimacy and belonging among participants. They are not merely members of a home group, but participants in a home group network, co-searchers on the Alpha journey and channels for the wisdom and knowledge generated from past experience and encounters with the spiritual.

Indeed, it is such a network of interactive contexts which may best characterise the community offered within St Michael's. While the *experience* of being fostered is seen in terms of a meeting of subjective needs, the medium through which this

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<sup>15</sup> Ferdinand Tönnies, *Community and Association* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1955).

<sup>16</sup> Michel Maffesoli, *The Time of the Tribes. The Decline of Individualism in Mass Society* (London: Sage, 1996).

<sup>17</sup> Berger *et al*, *The Homeless Mind*, p. 167.

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occurs is an overlapping network of meetings, interest groups, services and friendship circles. As with the *Visions* group, these have an affinity with a particular set of social interests, catering to the middle class socialities of its membership. But the huge scale of St Michael's means that community is inevitably mediated by diffuse networks and the choices individuals make about which church meetings best suit their needs. In this way the networks addressed in the previous section play an important part in fostering the intersubjectivity that is at the heart of evangelical community.

This phenomenon was explored in detail in chapter 5, where the culturally driven *subjective turn* was explored in relation to the charismatic movement. For many evangelical Christians, this gradual sea change has set human relationships within a new framework, rendering existing relational dynamics pregnant with spiritual meaning while generating new styles of devotional practice and novel forms of power. This complex development has led to a variety of innovations across the evangelical world, the charismatic framing the collapse of hard boundaries dividing church from the therapeutic world on the one hand, while the Toronto Blessing and its successors have intensified the performative aspects of congregational life and caused some significant upheaval.

While different churches have embraced the charismatic renewal movement to different degrees, it is fair to say that the movement has nonetheless paralleled a transformation in evangelical culture of which it was partially, at least, the cause. This transformation, which had its axis in the 1960s, was characterised by a celebration of subjective experience coupled with a newfound willingness to embrace movements and media from the wider culture as resources co-opted into the job of promoting the gospel message. This led to the blurring and in some cases tearing down of boundaries which were previously sacrosanct, and opened the evangelical movement more radically to cultural influence. Culture was befriended as a potential ally and, eventually, as a family member who could no longer be conveniently left at the church door each Sunday. As Donald Miller's work on new paradigm churches in the US has demonstrated, such developments are often born out of a passion for evangelism, but foster an enculturation of evangelicalism that has far-reaching consequences for congregational life.<sup>18</sup> As worship, social justice, business ethics, leisure, sport, music, are all allowed beneath the evangelical sacred canopy as channels of the gospel and legitimate aspects of church life, so they foster a rich subculture which, because of the movement's constituency, shares many affinities with middle class lifestyles and values: expressivism, harmony, mutual support, tolerance, equality, acceptance of the religious 'other', enthusiasm for notable speakers and authors, and a sympathy with a reflective, embodied appreciation of human experience not unlike that driving the alternative therapy industry. Alongside this, the more counter-cultural dimension to evangelical identity

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<sup>18</sup> Donald E. Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism. Christianity in the New Millennium* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1997).

has often been veiled behind a congenial public face, keen to affirm an expressive, tactile hospitality which sits uncomfortably with the combative tones of yesteryear.

Given these developments, in asking what evangelicals now affirm as their dominant mode of cultural engagement, it is tempting to speak of harnessing cultural affinities rather than the drawing of battle lines. The contemporary cynicism towards the more intensely performative aspects of charismatic spirituality, described in chapter 5, has also been accompanied by a reversion to more inclusive, holistic, altogether more tempered manifestations of the Holy Spirit. Even the Toronto Airport Christian Fellowship, once the global hub of the 'Blessing', has in recent years embraced more sedate forms of charismatic practice, embodied less in exuberance and open theatrics, more in a gentle tranquillity that reflects a turn towards a healing ministry with a decidedly therapeutic flavour.<sup>19</sup> It seems the ritualised performance of charismatic spirituality might take different forms over time, changing largely, perhaps, in response to shifting perceptions of power and authority. However, the enculturation of evangelicalism, which was urged on by charismatic renewal, has for the most part followed a consistent trajectory, i.e., more and more aspects of everyday life have been actively incorporated into the evangelical world as spiritually significant.

What is also clear from the foregoing analysis is that identity boundaries are continually negotiated in accordance with the needs of congregations and this is inevitably informed by the cultural identities of members. In certain respects, religion endorses the social order of the group's membership, or minimally that which allows members to affirm their social identity using religious means. Joseph Tamney makes a similar observation with respect to conservative Protestant congregations in the USA. Arguing against Dean Kelley's famous argument, which explains the success of conservative churches with reference to the strict, clear and exacting demands they make of their members, Tamney claims that 'when people need meaning, they do not automatically seek out a costly religion, but commit to one that is consistent with their ongoing values and beliefs'.<sup>20</sup> Within St Michael's, this is clear from the control of public discourse in sermons and in words of knowledge. Issues likely to cause conflict are evaded while members are given the means with which to affirm their existing values and conventions, and work through their worries. The value system of the church sits most comfortably with the social

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<sup>19</sup> See Martyn Percy, 'Adventure and Atrophy in a Charismatic Movement: Returning to the "Toronto Blessing"', *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 20:1 (2005), pp. 71-90. A recent example of this shift is what the Toronto Fellowship call 'soaking events', which appeal to images of immersion and tranquillity to describe an experience of the Holy Spirit that emphasises a quiet, invigorating encounter with God's presence, manifested in falling or in long periods of lying on the floor. According to the Fellowship's website, 'To "soak" in God's presence is to rest in His love rather than to "strive" in prayer'. See <http://www.tacf.org/tacforhome/CatchTheFireMinistries/SoakingPrayerCenters/>, accessed 1 August 2007.

<sup>20</sup> Joseph B. Tamney, *The Resilience of Conservative Religion. The Case of Popular, Conservative Protestant Congregations* (Cambridge: CUP, 2002), p. 227.

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constituency of its congregation, so that career advancement, education, the nuclear family and issues of personal emotional struggle are absorbed into the divine plan and then projected as ordained priorities into the faith-lives of individual members. One hypothesis as to why this occurs may refer to how middle-class values are diffused throughout British culture, but lack an ordering framework. Within an increasingly amoral, media-driven, fast-paced western society, moral order is elusive, a special concern among uprooted middle-class families with young children. St Michael's appears to skate that fine line between accommodating to a theologically diverse congregation while providing ample space for the expression and exploration of traditional understandings of moral order. The peculiar way in which moral teaching is dealt with, discussed in chapter 4, brings this out most clearly. To refer back to Berger, 'homeless minds' are provided with solace and a place in which to share their homelessness, but the spiritual homes provided are flexible enough to be able to adapt to individual needs and theological diversity.

Heelas and Woodhead employ a similar argument in explaining the popularity of the holistic milieu, including alternative therapies, spiritualities and the wellbeing culture. These phenomena successfully cater to the subjective turn that characterises contemporary western culture by affirming, cultivating and often even sacralising the subjective lives of individuals.<sup>21</sup> While charismatic evangelical churches would typically distance themselves from such expressions of the New Age Movement, they nevertheless embody this broader cultural shift. Of course, when asked about authority, they more often than not turn to scripture, but in terms of everyday practice, there is a discernible freedom with which human experience, in its mundane and spectacular forms, is attributed with spiritual meaning.

### **Changes at the Margins**

It would be a mistake to conclude that this evolved subjectivisation always fosters a healthy inclusivism among evangelicals. The same dynamics sometimes work towards the exclusion of those who fail to find meaning within a particular set of cultural affinities. It was the recognition of this which triggered the emergence of what became the *Visions* group. Reaching out to those for whom conventional church was anathema, they broke out of the bonds of the evangelical subculture from whence they came. They embodied the dance culture in an attempt to preach the gospel in a way which was culturally authentic to the clubbers. In effect, they established their own subculture with its own set of boundaries. *Visions* found itself on the margins, between evangelicalism and secular culture. It has continued to embody this liminal identity, even if the social capital that once connected them with the clubbers has subsequently diminished, the group instead focusing largely on its own needs rather than those of any single target audience. The markers of the dance culture have become the *Visions* culture, absorbing group interests, artistic

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<sup>21</sup> Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution. Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), p. 81.

preferences and shared grievances along the way. In this respect members also affirm their own social identities through their religious practice.

Because of its small scale and marginalised status in relation to St Michael's and the rest of the church, *Visions* has developed a peculiar combination of open, exploratory theology within a close-knit micro-culture. Most strikingly, they are social separatists by inclination, preferring to mix with others of a like-mind and often feeling alienated from mainstream evangelicalism and those affiliated to it. Thus, while St Michael's has arguably extended its affinities with contemporary middle class culture, *Visions* has adopted a hard set of social boundaries against it. Indeed, this sometimes issues in open expression during worship. During a service run by *Visions* but held in St Michael-le-Belfrey, one *Visions* member performed a 'rant', a diatribe against the superficiality of consumerism and the evils of the branding and designer-label culture. When discussing this event with me, one St Michael's member took exception to the rant, claiming that he had friends who had to buy designer clothes because of their jobs. They felt the accusation of exclusivism could be levelled at the *Visions* group, especially when they make people feel a bit too 'straight'.

This is one of the main reasons why an appeal to postmodernity alone – with the associations of deregulation that it implies – is insufficient for an understanding of alternative worship groups such as *Visions*. While embracing a multi-media technology that appears to undermine traditional parameters of meaning, these groups largely exist as *marginalised enclaves*. As such, they rely on oppositional relationships for a sense of identity, whether their nemesis is consumer culture, free market capitalism or the mainstream church. Moreover, the cultural resources upon which they draw in defining their identities are inevitably shaped by traditional social factors, particularly gender, class, generation and ecclesiastical background. The innovations of postmodernity take place within the confines of localised conditions.

In recent years, the status of the movement to which *Visions* belongs has changed, and these changes have arguably compromised the sense of marginality previously so important to those post-evangelicals seeking solace within the alt.worship network. On the one hand, there remains an important distinction between the more theologically radical, long-standing alt.worship groups, and those opting into its brand as a means of promoting multi-media worship within an otherwise fairly mainstream evangelical tradition, and this distinction is upheld by those wishing to maintain a sense of post-evangelical credibility. The same tension is replicated in the US, where Emergent Village, the network of mission-focused Christians committed to an open-ended, critical reappraisal of Christianity for a new era, find themselves sharing the 'emerging' label with young evangelicals keen to wear the clothes and speak the language of contemporary culture, but who also show no signs of challenging their existing theological assumptions.<sup>22</sup> However, at

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<sup>22</sup> See Andy Crouch, 'The Emerging Mystique', *Christianity Today* 48:11 (2004), pp. 36-43.

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the same time, many groups that were considered radical and cutting edge during the 1990s have been absorbed more comfortably into the mainstream, and this has been driven by a number of factors. Much has to do with the gradual fading of what Steve Bruce has called the 'radical impetus'.<sup>23</sup> Many alt.worship groups have shrunk in size and lost momentum and their public profile has diminished, with the more successful groups, like *Sanctus 1* in Manchester, depending to some degree on formal links with church structures. At the same time, the more successful, and less radical, youth events, such as Soul Survivor, have become the public face of youth Christianity, eclipsing more experimental initiatives that rarely enjoy the same financial backing. As alt.worship groups have sought new direction, those within the mainstream church have shown themselves to be more receptive to their innovations. Memories of the ignominy of the Nine O'Clock Service have faded and church leaders have softened their perspective on progressive forms of worship. Indeed, the 'fresh expressions' initiative of the Church of England has attempted to embrace alt.worship as a legitimate and valued expression of Christian community.

Influential figures within the alt.worship movement have also grown older, perhaps less rebellious, and many have found themselves in positions of institutional leadership. Indeed, it could be argued that alt.worship groups have been highly effective in fostering leadership skills in their long-standing members, and have perhaps facilitated the spiritual maturation necessary for responsible ministry. Dave Tomlinson claims that, during the 1990s, he was one of five regulars at Holy Joe's, the alternative church held in a London pub, who went on to be ordained.<sup>24</sup> Interestingly, around the same number have emerged from St Michael-le-Belfrey in recent years to pursue the same ambition. Clearly, for some, alt.worship has not been a last chance saloon on the way out of the church, nor a one-way retreat to the margins, but has been a source of spiritual reinvigoration and vocational renewal. Several of these individuals have published books about alt.worship, the pragmatics of doing it and its underlying theology, and, together with the literary efforts of their American and Australasian associates, these have issued the movement with its own body of literature,<sup>25</sup> filtering into teaching, worship and the informal discussions through which emerging identities are constructed and explored. Still more individuals maintain an open and evolving dialogue with an international constituency through their online blogs.

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<sup>23</sup> Steve Bruce, *God is Dead. Secularization in the West* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), p. 24.

<sup>24</sup> Heather Webb, 'Continuing the Journey: A Conversation with Dave Tomlinson', *Mars Hill Review* 18 (2001), p. 75.

<sup>25</sup> The emerging church literature has been sustained and nurtured in large part by the sizeable US market and particularly by the Zondervan publishing house, based in Grand Rapids, Michigan. In recent years, Zondervan have been responsible for publishing books by a wide range of well-known luminaries within the emerging church world, including Kester Brewin, Dan Kimball, Brian McLaren, Doug Pagitt, Steve Taylor and Robert Webber. They also published the revised US editions of Jonny Baker's *Alternative Worship* in 2004 and Dave Tomlinson's *The Post-Evangelical* in 2003.

These developments have placed one-time radicals in what are almost establishment positions and they are now more likely to be encouraging, or even leading, gentle reform of the church than railing against it, or lamenting its mainstream mediocrity. At the same time, the ideas and resources once the preserve of the marginal have become accessible and desirable to a much wider audience, some based in churches which identify with the fresh expressions label, or who have felt affirmed following the *Mission Shaped Church* Report. Effectively, as labels like 'fresh expressions', 'alt.worship' and 'emerging church' have become common among mainstream Christians,<sup>26</sup> their meaning has become destabilised and as innovation in worship and community has become more acceptable, these Christians have a ready, flexible language with which to describe their activities. There has been a convergence of cultural capital, as the resources and ideas previously particular to mainstream evangelicals on the one hand, and progressives on the other, have merged to form a single, complex repertoire at the general disposal of the church. The artistic exuberance of the charismatic movement has evolved to a point where it has dissolved previously important boundaries between evangelicals of different shades, and has expanded and redefined the mainstream body of the movement.<sup>27</sup>

### **Conservative Resurgence**

However, the situation is not so simple, or so monochrome, and as mainstream evangelicals find their numbers expanded, so others are content to be pushed even further to the edges, where more rigid boundaries of identity remain normative. This is especially the case for those elements of the movement who see contemporary culture as something from which the church should be clearly distinguished, lest it be tainted by it. For such conservative elements of the evangelical world, the church is inevitably presented as an a-cultural entity, the pure remnant around which all aspects of our aberrant society need to be gathered in order to be appropriately cleansed. Interestingly, the most well-known British representatives of this outlook – the organisations of Reform and Christian Voice – both present the mission of the church in national terms, as a quest to rescue England from its 'desperate spiritual

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<sup>26</sup> Peter Brierley claims that, by 2006, there were around 25,000 individuals in England attending 420 churches that referred to themselves as a 'fresh expression'. See Peter Brierley, *Pulling Out of the Nosedive. A Contemporary Picture of Churchgoing* (London: Christian Research, 2006), p. 37.

<sup>27</sup> In noting increasing internal diversity and the enthusiasm of evangelical congregations in offering a range of activities for their members, David Hilborn identifies symptoms of the same trend. He presents this as evidence that mainstream evangelicalism has absorbed postmodern ideas to a greater degree than many commentators care to admit, especially those who would present postmodernity as the preserve of those occupying the radical margins of the movement. See David Hilborn, *Picking up the Pieces. Can Evangelicals Adapt to Contemporary Culture?* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1997), pp. 48-51.



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and moral condition'.<sup>28</sup> Hence their immediate missional focus is culture and cultural problems, but these are conceived as entirely separate from the church, which retains a quasi-sectarian purity. This stands in stark contrast to the perspective implicit within the post-evangelicalism of the alt.worship movement, for whom culture is ontologically prior when it comes to matters of identity and, as such, is to be respected and affirmed, rather than denied. While this position is a radical one, it is consistent with the dominant trend in present-day British evangelicalism in so far as culture is viewed as a positive opportunity rather than a threat.

Having said this, the distinctively conservative – rather than charismatic – emphases of Reform and Christian Voice do reflect a discernible British resurgence in recent years of a conservative form of evangelicalism. At the congregational level, one could refer to Jesmond Parish Church, whose vicar, David Holloway, has strong links with Reform. Jesmond Parish Church is a well-known successful centre of conservative evangelicalism in the North East of England and now claims to attract around 1,000 individuals to its Sunday services. As such, it is achieving a popularity that even surpasses St Michael-le-Belfrey and reflects a trend across the North East that is partially propelled by the Emmanuel Schools Foundation, directed by wealthy car dealer and prominent evangelical Peter Vardy. The Foundation has overseen the establishment of three privately sponsored schools in Gateshead, Doncaster and Middlesbrough, all of which enjoy significant autonomy due to their status as a city technology college, in the case of Emmanuel College Gateshead, or as City Academies, in the case of the other two. Repeatedly accused of incorporating creationism into biology classes,<sup>29</sup> these secondary schools are openly governed according to an evangelical Christian ethos, which informs staff recruitment, pupil admissions and some aspects of the curriculum.

A further noteworthy development is the appearance in recent years of Christianity Explored, an introductory course on Christianity designed by the Revd Rico Tice, a Chilean educated in Africa, who joined the staff of All Soul's, Langham Place as an associate minister in 1994. The course follows a virtually identical format to Alpha: there are ten weekly meetings involving a shared meal, DVD or video of a talk by Rico Tice, followed by discussion. Also like Alpha, it promotes itself as an opportunity for those interested in Christianity to ask the 'big' questions in a pressure-free, relaxed environment. However, the course differs from Alpha in organising sessions around a week-by-week study of Mark's Gospel, with the emphasis on 'who Jesus was, what his aims were, and what it means to follow him'.<sup>30</sup> While not as successful on anywhere near the same scale as Alpha,

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<sup>28</sup> Revd David Holloway, vicar of Jesmond Parish Church and a key spokesperson for the Reform group, cited in Martyn Percy, 'A Blessed Rage for Order: Exploring the Rise of "Reform" in the Church of England', *Journal of Anglican Studies* 3:1 (2005), p. 43.

<sup>29</sup> See Joachim Allgaier and Richard Holliman, 'The Emergence of the Controversy Around the Theory of Evolution and Creationism in UK Newspaper Reports', *The Curriculum Journal* 17.3 (September, 2006), pp. 263-79.

<sup>30</sup> Taken from the Christianity Explored website – <http://www.seeking.org.uk/>, accessed 3 August 2007.

Christianity Explored is nevertheless branded and packaged for distribution and application in local congregations across the globe. It has established itself as an alternative to Alpha – the charismatic element is absent, and the substantive focus is more explicitly biblical – and is openly embraced by such flag-ship evangelical churches as Christ Church Fulwood, near Sheffield, and Jesmond Parish Church.

The emerging conservative strand does not take the same form as the anti-charismatic evangelicalism of the 1960s and 70s. Indeed, the austerity and severity of expression, coloured by a bookish articulacy and rather British concern for discipline and proper conduct, appears to have been overtaken by a more relaxed, relational tone which characterises the bulk of the evangelical movement. In this, ‘charismaticisation’, as Dave Tomlinson has called it, does indeed reflect a sea change, evident also in the widespread entrepreneurialism with which evangelicals deploy cultural resources in the name of the gospel. But while a strict separatism is rarely evident in practice, those representing a conservative resurgence do affirm a more intense suspicion of contemporary culture, painting modern day Britain in fairly dark shades, emphasising moral and spiritual bankruptcy. The consequent quest for clearer boundaries of belief and practice is also reflected in a determination to appear more explicitly biblical than their forebears and, perhaps especially, than their charismatic cousins. This is apparent in the Christianity Explored course, which takes the form of an extended Bible study, albeit one aimed at the unchurched; in the activities of the Proclamation Trust, which, through its conferences, aims to equip leaders with biblical knowledge in the way that New Wine attempts to equip leaders with spiritual gifts; and in the material produced by Anglican Mainstream, a coalition of evangelical activist groups that fiercely advocates ‘traditional biblical teaching on marriage, the family and human sexuality’.<sup>31</sup> It is also a trend that is particularly strong within some of the popular university Christian Unions, for whose members biblical obedience involves an obligation to live by a strict moral code, an effective identity marker within an environment characterised by youthful abandon and often hedonistic indulgence.

Evangelicals have gravitated to this more conservative position for a variety of reasons. Some seek out the more firmly established historical roots of traditional liturgy in preference to the saccharine tones of the charismatic chorus, eventually finding charismatic renewal modish to the point of being transient, superficial or capricious. Some have grown utterly disillusioned with the charismatic following the intensity of the Toronto Blessing. Others, perhaps like the St Michael’s staff member whose outlook was described at the beginning of chapter 4, associate the charismatic with a certain wooliness and absence of doctrinal rigour. According to this viewpoint, an emphasis upon human experience as a site for divine activity has allowed emotion, immediacy, intuition and performance to overshadow responsible, rational and concerted reflection upon the nature of Christian truth.

Whatever the reasons for this intriguing change in the evangelical landscape, it raises important questions about the future of the movement: for unity, conflict, and

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<sup>31</sup> [http://www.anglican-mainstream.net/?page\\_id=216](http://www.anglican-mainstream.net/?page_id=216), accessed 13 August 2007.

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also for its capacity to successfully negotiate patterns of cultural change. The tendency of conservative elements to fan the flames of cultural dissent and highlight points of difference, especially on moral issues, may foster the kind of evangelical tension that Christian Smith views as crucial to the vitality of the movement. If this argument holds, then the future of evangelicalism may depend on such factions periodically calling on Christians to bridle their accommodation to cultural trends. But what for some are prophetic voices are, for others, forces of retrenchment which impede the mission of the church by isolating it from the wider society and alienating its less conservative members. This is not just an issue of competing ideologies; as was demonstrated in chapter 7, evangelical congregations are shaped not merely by the values they profess, but also by the community structures they adopt as media for their expression. Moreover, the embodied and practical expression of collective identity may actually be weakened by the affirmation of a conservative agenda. This is illustrated nicely through a consideration of human relationships within evangelical congregations, and we turn again to the case of St Michael's as a useful case study.

Whatever the belief structures of this church might be – and the foregoing analysis suggests they are complex to say the least – what appears most striking about why members value being a part of St Michael's is the provision of an effective support network. The class and occupational profile of the congregation reflects this priority and their projects very much centre on the forging of affective relationships. Members rely on one another for mutual support, moral guidance and emotional nurture. According to the welcome cards which were distributed to newcomers at the time of my original research, St Michael's is

... a fellowship of Christian believers who believe seriously in the life-changing power of God's mercy and truth. We are a church where you can experience friendship, fellowship and acceptance as we grow together in our love and commitment to Jesus Christ.

The emphases here are telling: no reference to scripture, no use of 'evangelical', no mention of 'authority', 'sound teaching', 'Bible' or 'scripture', 'judgement' or even 'salvation'. Instead, the description emphasises this-worldly experience of God, alongside affirming qualities of 'friendship' and 'acceptance'. This is indicative of two things: the ubiquitous diplomacy of public discourse and the prioritisation of inter-personal support and intimacy. The latter feature in particular appears to be a key characteristic across the evangelical world; indeed, Stephen Hunt, working from a national UK survey, has discovered this to be central to the appeal of the Alpha course.<sup>32</sup> Given what Hunt also discovers about who attends these courses – chiefly existing churchgoers rather than unchurched 'seekers' – Alpha may be viewed less as a context of Christian evangelism, more as a window on to the aspirations of

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<sup>32</sup> Stephen Hunt, *The Alpha Enterprise. Evangelism in a Post-Christian Era* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), p. 182.

already committed Christians, these being focused on the exploration of faith and spirituality *in relationship with others*.

What is important here is not just the availability of support, but the availability of opportunities to adopt supportive roles. St Michael's offers a supportive and extensive community of like-minded friends, a context for the transmission of 'sound family values' of love and responsibility (especially appealing to those with small children), and opportunities for authority and empowerment consonant with one's own organisational, pastoral or pedagogical skills. It is these factors which appear to elicit continued commitment and enthusiastic involvement from parishioners. Of course, in addition to this is the reputation and spiritual pedigree of the church, which enhances feelings of status and of participating in an *effective* evangelical fellowship. If anything, St Michael's is saturated with the notion that this is a church which *actually works* – it lives out the gospel in ways which are socially visible and members cling on to this with pride and an almost tangible enthusiasm.

Given the apparent importance of relationships for the life of churches like St Michael's, as both channels of open spiritual expression and inter-personal support, and as a means of lay empowerment, it is interesting to reflect on how such dynamics might proceed within congregations committed to the more conservative evangelicalism described earlier. Such churches often combine a thoroughgoing biblicism with a more hierarchical model of leadership than that common within charismatic churches. Access to positions of power is more heavily curtailed, especially for women, with groups like Reform remaining strongly against the legitimacy of women's headship. Teaching is also more likely to take a direct, prescriptive form, and while the format of Christianity Explored indicates a willingness to foster an informal, exploratory context for seekers, norms of authority *within* the congregation are more likely to be structured around consistency and obedience, perhaps extending to the expectation of regular tithing. This style of evangelicalism does not present a bar to lay empowerment or strong support networks, but it does foster a very different kind of congregational culture to that described in the preceding chapters. Contemporary culture is treated with far greater suspicion, doctrinal orthodoxy is more likely to be policed and authority sustained as a preserve of the few. In such an environment, the expansive enculturation that St Michael's have managed to sustain alongside a firm sense of evangelical identity, and which has arguably been instrumental to its creativeness and success, is less likely to emerge and be encouraged. There are also more likely to be tensions between the cultural capital of educated middle-class evangelicals and the conservative positions they are expected to adopt, perhaps unquestioningly. It is difficult to understand the strength and vitality of largely middle-class evangelical churches apart from the cultural capital of many middle-class Christians: their theological articulacy, professional status and abilities, family orientation and disposable income. But there have to be channels for the expression of this capital; otherwise, one can see how disempowerment might emerge and become a force for stagnation.

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On the other hand, when an open and more organic spirituality is reined in by a more rigidly defined moral-religious framework, issuing 'clear and exacting demands', it is understandable that evangelicals who yearn for a more bounded, morally trenchant Christianity would find this model attractive. That many appear to do so suggests empowerment of the kind described above is not essential for all evangelicals and perhaps, as Dean Kelley implies in his work, the chief mode of engagement among Christians seeking order in a postmodern world is not empowerment, but a form of submission. Moreover, the relationship between a strict, hierarchical evangelicalism and the empowerment of women is more complex than is often assumed, as Brenda Brasher has demonstrated within the USA,<sup>33</sup> and future research would do well to examine how congregations which teach a traditionalist line on gender roles nevertheless provide a context in which empowering and supportive relationships among women may emerge.

### **Evangelical Growth and Vitality**

The argument that evangelical community is often embodied within discrete networks, and that these networks are especially suited to meeting the subjective needs of evangelical identities, is perhaps most applicable to large, middle-class churches, in which there is a high turnover of members, hence a high premium on support and high levels of mobile cultural capital. While such features appear to be conducive to fostering a dynamic and thriving congregation, powerful sociological arguments to the contrary remain. Specifically, do high levels of activism alongside a high turnover come at the expense of community cohesion, and hence durability? The question remains as to whether this arrangement leads to an inevitable *weakening of commitment*, on the grounds that a focus on meeting subjective needs compromises the cohesiveness of congregations as communities. This is a serious question, and one that might be answered in the affirmative by leaders of the conservative churches described above, who would probably associate doctrinal consistency with communal strength. Moreover, while my earlier stress upon communicative cultures highlights how the relationship between subjectivisation and fragmentation is not simple or uniform, decline has nevertheless emerged as a decisive trend within the apparently thriving church of St Michael-le-Belfrey. Indeed, while maintaining high levels of commitment, St Michael's is not managing to retain as many committed members as it used to. As charted in chapter 3, by the turn of the millennium, attendance levels had experienced a steady decline since 1993, fewer people were involved in home groups than before and financial giving had declined in real terms. St Michael's was not enjoying the same levels of success which it intermittently sustained during the 1970s and 80s. Why might this be so? Several possibilities can be suggested, and they are worth addressing in turn as they

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<sup>33</sup> Brenda Brasher, *Godly Women. Fundamentalism and Female Power* (New Brunswick, NJ, and London: Rutgers University Press, 1998).

illuminate factors often overlooked in discussions of church growth and decline in the UK.

First, the generation which committed to David Watson's ministry in the 1960s are growing older and dying. Following H. Richard Niebuhr's classic argument about how sects evolve into denominations, it is possible that subsequent generations are less committed on account of not choosing but inheriting their membership, and some are not remaining within the church.<sup>34</sup> St Michael's is not a sect of course, but the success of the late 1960s was certainly accountable in large part to the charisma and initiatives of an inspiring leader. A subsequent fading of commitment and momentum is not just attributable to the fact that such original enthusiasm is by definition episodal and transient; it is also connected to the fact that David Watson has been a difficult act to follow. Succeeding clergy have been measured against his reputation – Watson often being idolised, especially after his death – and this has contributed to internal conflict and disappointment. Similar patterns can be found in other churches associated with a long-standing, charismatic leader, and Donald Miller has written of the fascinating problems the Vineyard Church faced after John Wimber's death in 1997.<sup>35</sup> However, in St Michael's, periods of decline have not occurred at times which support this theory, and very high levels of attendance continued well after Watson's departure. It is possible that any disillusionment may have taken some years before its effects were fully realised, especially given the overlap between Watson's and Graham Cray's ministry. Perhaps the honeymoon period extended well into the 1980s because Watson's influence was still clearly felt, not least in the deputy who succeeded him.

A more plausible, but not unrelated, explanation might refer to the narrowing of spirituality in the early 1990s. The introduction of the Toronto Blessing and the accompanying heightened and dramatised use of charismatic gifts, which were foregrounded in church life to the exclusion of other, less expressivist, forms of spirituality, provoked feelings of alienation and some disinvolvement. Indeed, as argued in chapter 5, this counter reaction to the third wave of charismatic renewal may well have been characteristic of evangelical churches across the UK. At the same time, some parishioners were less than comfortable with public teaching which affirmed conservative views on authority, women and biblical moral teaching. While attendance statistics do not suggest a mass exodus, they do support the possibility that fewer new members stayed within the church than they used to, or perhaps long-term members continued to leave in small clusters throughout the 1990s. As several of the long-term members who left were apparently involved in church leadership, it is also possible that they prompted others to act similarly. If this argument holds, then it counts firmly against Peter Berger's position, i.e. that the most thriving religious groups are those which erect successful boundaries

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<sup>34</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (New York: Meridian, 1962).

<sup>35</sup> Donald E. Miller, 'Routinizing Charisma: The Vineyard Christian Fellowship in the Post-Wimber Era', *Pneuma* 25.2 (Fall, 2003), pp. 216-39.

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against modern influence, as an attempt to steer church life in a more strictly dogmatic, counter-cultural direction, appears to have provoked decline and division rather than vitality. Additionally, it would stand against Dean Kelley's claim about conservative churches growing, as it was a switch from a more liberal to a more conservative position that coincided with a period of decline in church attendance.<sup>36</sup>

Third, an external factor may relate to growth among independent evangelical churches in the immediate locality. In his otherwise comprehensive study of church attendance, Robin Gill does not have figures for these<sup>37</sup> so it is impossible to make precise comparisons, although insider estimates provided in 2002 do suggest significant pockets of growth. To take one example, at this time, The Rock Church, situated just a few streets away from St Michael's, consistently enjoyed attendances of over 300 with midweek small groups of up to sixty. According to church leaders, these levels had been as high as this for two to three years, so it is possible that decline in St Michael's is at least in part due to potential new members – many of them students – worshipping elsewhere. Also significant in the early 1990s was the North Yorkshire Vineyard Church, planted by David Watson's widow, Anne, and initially populated by former St Michael's members. At its peak, it was attracting around 120 individuals. After Watson left, it quickly fell into decline and eventually shut down after the congregation shrank to around twenty and could no longer support its pastor. While this church is no longer competing with St Michael's for members, it is possible that those who joined but then left have not returned to St Michael-le-Belfrey, perhaps going elsewhere, perhaps remaining faithful to the Vineyard and seeking out one of their other churches in the North of England.

Finally, and this returns to the point about community discussed earlier, it could be the case that St Michael's caters to its target audience a little too well. To expand, the leadership recognises that much of its congregational body is made up of students and elective parochials, who will probably move on within the space of a few years. While some are aware of the limitations which this engenders (see the quotation from one of the leadership team in chapter 3), the church appears to have adapted its outlook so as to cater to these people. This was made clear during small group sessions, where former members were remembered and prayed for without any degree of regret or disappointment. That many would move into and among the church's structures for a temporary period before moving on was accepted as inevitable. But as Wuthnow has argued with respect to small groups, this outlook

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<sup>36</sup> Paul Chambers' recent research among congregations in Wales has also explored how evangelicalism itself can generate fragmentation and decline, especially when introduced into a community unused to this tradition. Chambers charts how the importation of an evangelical perspective by a new incumbent caused serious dissent among local parishioners because it disrupted established norms of social, as well as religious, order. See Paul Chambers, 'The Effects of Evangelical Renewal on Mainstream Congregational Identities: A Welsh Case Study', in M. Guest, et al (eds.), *Congregational Studies in the UK*, pp. 57-69.

<sup>37</sup> Robin Gill, *The Empty Church Revisited* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003).

allows bonding to remain temporary and commitment becomes attenuated.<sup>38</sup> There is a sense in which expectations of commitment have acclimatised to the mobile predicament of elective parochials so that the authentic member is no longer one who commits to a home group, attends services every Sunday and comes to the monthly prayer meeting. Rather, the authentic member is one who attends, maybe sporadically, occasionally, or who focuses their commitment on special occasions. Those gravitating to special events rather than committing to regular Sunday attendance may be described, using Simon Coleman's term, as 'conference people',<sup>39</sup> seeking occasions of heightened experience rather than a long-term commitment to a single church. This may reflect a tendency replicated across the English churches, given Peter Brierley's 2005 Church Census finding that occasional attendees are more likely to attend a growing church,<sup>40</sup> and it would be interesting to explore whether other large evangelical churches maintain a comparable contingent of irregular participants. This shift in orientation mirrors the increase in elective parochialism and offers an illuminating example of how demographic trends inform changes in religious practice.

The segmentation of church life into a series of available meetings and services may also, paradoxically, contribute to a weakening of commitment. Individuals simply associate membership with participation (i.e., at whichever service or meeting is convenient) rather than with attendance at a prescribed series of gatherings. Therefore, there is a possibility that as expectations of long-term commitment have lowered, or at least a more attenuated commitment has become more acceptable, fewer occasional participants have made the transition to becoming a full member by involving themselves in an extended range of regular church activities. One dimension of this change relates to the status of home groups, which in recent years have become increasingly popular, suggesting a possible shift in the understanding of where the social axis of evangelical identity actually lies (see Epilogue).

If valid, this argument would endorse Steve Bruce's claim that liberalised religious groups have less chance of growing than consistently conservative or strict ones. However, a qualification needs to be made. Bruce, it would seem, is right to highlight the consequences of insufficiently emphasising the difference between membership and non-membership,<sup>41</sup> and this problem is highlighted in the diverse spectrum of commitment represented within the congregation of St Michael-le-Belfrey. However, I would challenge the simple correlation between a liberal outlook and a propensity to decline. According to Bruce, liberal churches are more likely to decline than conservative ones because the diffuseness of their beliefs

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<sup>38</sup> Robert Wuthnow, *Sharing the Journey. Support Groups and America's New Quest for Community* (New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, Singapore: The Free Press, 1996), p. 25.

<sup>39</sup> Simon Coleman, *The Globalisation of Charismatic Christianity. Spreading the Gospel of Prosperity* (Cambridge: CUP, 2000), pp. 108-9.

<sup>40</sup> Brierley, *Pulling Out of the Nosedive*, pp. 199-200.

<sup>41</sup> Steve Bruce, *A House Divided. Protestantism, Schism and Secularization* (London: Routledge, 1989), pp. 152-3.



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makes them unstable as social institutions.<sup>42</sup> According to my analysis, the beliefs of the evangelicals in St Michael's are significantly liberalised and on some issues diverse. Yet decline has set in at points in its recent history when *conservative* reforms have been introduced into an already liberalised, or at least liberalising, church, threatening to rein in a broadening theological vision or inclusive understanding of spiritual legitimacy. As I argued in chapter 4, St Michael's has developed a method for managing its internal diversity by controlling public utterance and evading issues likely to cause fracture. Moreover, issues most likely to mobilise discontent appear to be those which invoke a narrow, conservative approach to the faith prone to exclusion and open judgement.

What is more likely to have contributed to long-term decline is not the development of a liberalised, more tolerant set of beliefs as such, but the church's accommodation to a particular target audience, i.e., mobile, middle-class evangelicals. In this respect the development of a liberalised collection of beliefs needs to be analytically distinguished from an accommodating orientation towards a specific cultural grouping. While the two may go hand in hand, this is not necessarily the case, and, as demonstrated earlier, liberalisation is inevitably filtered by local factors, which may allay as well as quicken trends in growth or decline.

If an adaptation to elective parochials has been instrumental in causing decline, then it is the church's fame which has been its undoing. Its reputation has secured a steady supply of students, visitors and mobile newcomers to the area and it is in adapting to their needs that the church has adjusted the expectations it has of its members. As it has tempered its demands and accepted the legitimacy of a more attenuated commitment, so membership has fallen, with some participants preferring to attend a series of churches rather than commit to a single one.

Of course, there may be other salient factors at play, particularly to do with the local religious economy. Because of its long-term success and the way in which its reputation and attendance levels tower above those of its ecclesiastical neighbours, the status of St Michael's is not contested. If it was, or had to contend with a significant presence of New Age spirituality or other faith communities in its locality, then it might have responded by affirming harder group boundaries. Alternatively, it might have liberalised more rapidly and more extensively. However, it would be pure speculation to suggest that either of these responses would have necessarily engendered decline or growth. As I hope I have demonstrated in earlier chapters, responses to culture are not simple or unidirectional, but are negotiated within the congregational cultures of specific church communities. Evangelicals have been most keen to embrace this process for their own as a theological priority, grounded in mission, and as such, their attempts to negotiate their way through contemporary culture, far from signalling decline and attrition, reflect the richness of life within the evangelical movement.

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<sup>42</sup> Steve Bruce, *God is Dead. Secularization in the West* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), p. 239.